

THE PLEASURES OF THE MULTIPLEX

Helen Stoddart

Wheeler Winston Dixon (ed), *Film Genres 2000: New Critical Essays*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2000, 266pp; £14.00 paperback, £35.00 cloth.

Robert Murphy (ed), *British Cinema of the 90s*, London, British Film Institute, 2000, 196pp; £14.99 paperback, £48.00 cloth.

Jürgen Müller (ed), *Movies of the Nineties*, London, Taschen, 2001, 800pp; £19.99 paperback.

How you feel about what happened to cinema, film and movies during the last decade or so of the twentieth century appears, from these three volumes, to depend very much on how you feel about multiplex cinemas. This will also suggest to you which one of these terms (movies, films, cinema) you are likely to use to describe your film watching experience. While 'movies' carries with it the unmistakable whiff of popcorn machines and the chink of ice-cube packed beakers, 'cinema' suggests a more liberal, perhaps slightly old-fashioned acknowledgement of a wider range of high and low venues and products, all interesting in their own way. 'Film', however, gives off an air of something more pristine; of 'texts' that may be removed from these messy contexts and enjoyed in a more solitary, private or even academic way. Still, the colossal impact of this form of cinema-going on the production, distribution, choice and reception of the films shapes the way in which films are selected, framed and appraised in each volume.

Culturally, *Movies of the 90s* constitutes a strange mixture of different takes on the period. Overwhelmingly it features mainstream Hollywood films, since its selection of films is mainly based on Oscar success (the highlights are listed, year by year, at the end of the book) and box office, mostly multiplex, hits. It is a German production, and the majority of the critical sources (briefly) cited are European newspapers and magazines (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Sight and Sound*, *Cahiers du Cinema*, *Der Spiegel*). Despite this, however, the only examples of German cinema featured in the book are the comedy *Maybe ... Maybe Not* (Sönke Wortmann, 1994) that, despite being hailed in *Variety* as 'Germany's funniest film for years ...', was not an international success, *Run Lola Run* (Tom Tykwer, 1998), and the German/US co-production *Dead Man* (Jim Jarmusch, 1995). The volume explodes with gloss and colour, and each film is typically represented across 4-6 pages with at least as many stills. Each of these is characteristically a

close or medium shot of one of the key performers in the film, rather than an illustration that might capture aspects of cinematography, setting or technological innovation. At the same time, the book does provide some very brief definitions of key terms that give quick clues to actors, genres, technical developments and so on. Yet there is little or no room for comment on the sexual politics of *True Lies* and, while a more critical volume might have pointed out the ways in which *Space Cowboys* (Clint Eastwood, 2000) missed numerous marks, the writer in this volume (Anne Pohl), under the heading 'Boys will be boys', compliments Clint Eastwood for having 'aged gracefully', and commends the film as a 'showpiece for its loveable and charismatic actors'. Primarily, then, this book is a treat for fans and list-makers; the extensive and multiple indexing coaxes the reader into making their own cross-referenced checks and enquiries about the successes, failures and broad trends of the period. And to whom, I wondered, did the decade really belong? Whose face was on most pages/screens? Tom Cruise, of course, and then Tom Hanks: both synonymous with holiday time blockbuster hit 'movies'. Yet there is great consolation (for those who watch cinema and film) in the fact that Ben Gazzara was not far behind these two.

In an odd reversal of type, Winston Wheeler Dixon's American collection, *Film Genre 2000*, is much more suspicious, sardonic and world weary in its approach to all the blast and sparkle of recent Hollywood genre film than Müller's enthusiastic European perspective on the same cinema. Dixon's introduction argues that Hollywood genre films are 'more formulaic than ever' and are often re-makes 'with a panoply of expensive sets and cameo performances by fleetingly popular television stars, all to justify the price of an increasingly expensive cinema ticket' (p6). Indeed there is a strong suggestion that audiences themselves (rather than film writers, directors or producers) are to blame for this decline because of their supposed demand for 'more of the same' (p8), their lazy disinclination 'to look beneath the surface of a given film's exterior narrative' and their dumb-headed fascination with 'issues of star power, box offices grosses ... and the pyrotechnics inherent in today's overproduced megaspectacles' (p7). Even if we were to endorse this critique of contemporary genre films and their audiences - never mind forgive the clumsy expression - there remains a problem with the book's failure to step into this breach by offering its own readers anything like the cultural contextualisation and counter-ideological readings it initially promises. So although Dixon argues that 'the implicit message in contemporary genre films is rarely that which is signified by film's [*sic*] external or even internal narrative structure' (p8), he concedes that 'there is nevertheless a core meaning imbedded in even the most desultory entertainments', and that it is the 'pervasive influence, and the numerous subtexts, of these films' (p9) with which he and his contributors will grapple in their numerous essays. The problem is that none of the essays comes close to providing the level of insight into the complexities and contradictions of popular entertainment cinema provided by critics

such as, for example, Carol Clover, Richard Dyer, Toby Miller or Yvonne Tasker. This preference for broad characterisation over critical inquiry is further compromised by a style that veers unconvincingly between empty jargon slinging and 'aint-it-cool' style wisecrack. For example, John C. Tibbetts, in his essay on literary adaptations, argues that 'postmodernist confabulations' present word and image in 'a perpetually shifting, weirdly multisensory, multimedia equilibrium. Neither book nor movie ... is the primary, or definitive text. Both proclaim themselves as independent alternatives. We have come to a fork in the road. And, as Yogi Berra once observed, we must take it' (p30). More importantly, however, none of the essays ever really engages with the issue of genre (previous theorists are mentioned only fleetingly) or with how the films they discuss may have challenged, confirmed or joked with existing generic paradigms: many questions are left hanging as a result. In what sense, for example, do literary adaptations or films made by African Americans constitute a genre? Have the boundaries of certain genres remained more intact than others?

By contrast, in Robert Murphy's BFI collection, *British Cinema of the Nineties*, issues of genre are only of marginal interest since the essays are neatly divided into those that offer accounts of the plight of British cinema institutions and those that articulate critiques of their representations of Britishness. All the contributions are short, highly contemporary in their focus and cover a range of films and film production issues. With the exception of Geoff Brown's rather emotive lament for the golden days when Penelope Houston 'scrupulously' edited *Sight and Sound* and Quentin Tarantino had not yet graduated from the video store, the essays are generally measured and insightful and would therefore constitute a very useful teaching aid. Through the continual references to the now disbanded Film Four, I was partly reminded of Martyn Auty and Nick Roddick's *British Cinema Now* (1985) that, as undergraduates in the mid-eighties, we used to refer to as 'British Cinema Then'. With the delays involved in publishing, even by the most efficient of presses, any study of the fast moving and highly contingent structures of British cinema is quickly overtaken by sudden closures, mergers and political crises; the weekly or monthly industry press is therefore always going to be the main resource for any researcher into the current state of film finance and distribution. Murphy, however, has wisely avoided this problem by defining his decade precisely and presenting multiple snapshots of the dominant movements and influences of the period. Among the essays on institutions, Stuart Hanson gives a useful history and assessment of the impact of multiplexes, while Geoffrey Macnab offers a fascinating account of the reasons why certain British films were made but never made it to the screen. Some excellent readings of individual films and film trends are also to be found, amongst which Moya Lockett's, Karen Lury's and Karen Alexander's particularly stand out. Lury's essay on British Youth cinema is one of the only pieces in any of the collections to address the use and the development of film technology, and her discussion of the mobilisation of

fish-eye (and other) lenses in *Trainspotting* (1996) is particularly adept. Luckett, however, has a very different perspective on the same film. She argues that there is a confluence between Blairism and the way that ‘much 90s mainstream cinema aspires to public relations, erasing conflict through the creation of images designed to create the illusion of direct communication with the public’ (p98). She goes on to distinguish between films that perpetuate such images and those, such as Mike Leigh’s *Secrets and Lies* (1996), which resist these assumptions. Although, perhaps inevitably, we tend to hear about many of the same films across the various contributions to the collection (*Trainspotting*, *Brassed Off* [1996], *Four Weddings and a Funeral* [1994], *The Full Monty* [1997], *Secrets and Lies*, *Nil by Mouth* [1997]), the benefit of this is that the volume is able to accommodate divergent perspectives on the same issues and films. Where Karen Alexander, for example, cites *Secrets and Lies* as an example of the way the representation of ‘the black experience of “Englishness”’ was compromised during the period by the lack of black film-makers who might articulate it more convincingly, Luckett celebrates the film’s quiet cross-culturalism, and is suspicious of the multiple disunities masked by terms such as ‘Englishness’. Perhaps of the three volumes this is the one which achieves the most successful balance between the excitement over the pleasure of the ‘movie’, a willingness to travel between small film theatre and multiplex entertainment complex, and worrying over stilled frames in seminars.

THE GOD BOX

Fred Botting

Paul Virilio, *A Landscape of Events*, Julie Rose (trans), Cambridge, Mass. and London, MIT Press, 2000, pp xiii + 100.

For God, history takes the form of a 'landscape of events' in which sequence cedes to the co-presence of everything, an atemporality without relief or depth. So Paul Virilio begins 'Calling Card', the undated introduction to a collection of observations whose dates range from 15 Nov 1984 to 15 May 1996 as they entwine specific global events, strands of technical and social history and askance comments that, though occasionally disturbing in their predictions, are as nostalgic as they are futurological. In the links that criss-cross this series of essays, however, God's position is supplanted by that of the contemporary televiewer and follows the model of a hypothesised film in which each sequence keeps 'the beginning and end in view' (pix). This is a 'landscape of events'.

Later, as the book moves back in time, Virilio offers a fuller example of this landscape. Recalling how he and 'a few pals' settled into their cinema seats with coffee, sandwiches and beer to watch a showing of a 10-hour newsreel entitled *Forty Years of History*, he notes that it was not the images of Sarajevo or the Reichstag that thrilled them, but 'the vehicles, the women's frocks and evening attire, the hats of the officials, transformed before our eyes'. This 'travelling shot forty years long' is neither history nor documentary but 'a vision of the great circus of Time', a 'landscape of events that God alone can contemplate' (p16). Now, the experience occurs in front of the small screen; the 'itinerary of the passer-by' through a landscape is turned into that of a sedentary spectator *being passed by*. So many programmes dedicated to the 1960s, '70s or '80s abound with footage feeding a nostalgia for the fashions, fads and commodities that have come to define a particular decade as much as any political event: 'it is no longer the big events that make up the fabric of the landscape of time, but the myriad incidents, minute facts either overlooked or deliberately ignored' (pxi). Where an indulgence in the vicissitudes of style bears out this shift from history to the incidental and minute, such attention to superficial detail also occludes the many other incidents and innovations that, for Virilio, are imbricated in wider political, social and economic transformations. The streetlighting of cities that supplants natural rhythms with the endless 'day' of Enlightenment, and the use of melatonin to supplement the post-diurnal body, are linked to the segregation of space in an individuated and lawless society shaped by a 'nocturnal splitting off of anational and asocial urban fringes', illuminated not by lamps, but by closed-

circuit cameras (p7). The celebration of Christmas no longer manifests the excesses of consumption but brings out a desire for 'sensory privatization' or lack, a wish to be dead among the over-energized bodies of the information society. Western illusions of technical superiority are upset by their own machines of reason; from Descartes's automata to contemporary sentient androids, the death of modern Man (after Foucault) is seen to follow directly from Nietzsche's death of God. Dislocated, the human figure is left to enjoy near-death experiences in an attempt to recapture him or herself, as the 'film of Genesis' is played backwards. On TV, of course.

A Landscape of Events constitutes Virilio's most sustained engagement with television to date, exploring its effects on history, memory, vision and bodies. Among his pithy proclamations on TV are comments identifying it as the 'machine tool' of the 'industrialisation of forgetting', and striking analogical observations: 'in the manner of Alzheimer's disease, television destroys our past feelings' (p12); or the following, making use of meteorology's 'atmospheric echo': 'when there are no longer any witnesses, there is no longer any memory and television's shadow area stretches to infinity' (p15). Television exemplifies Virilio's speculative 'museum of accidents', a space dedicated to playing out the necessary counterside of technological progress. The inventions of trains, planes and cars also introduce derailments, crashes, pile-ups, each new tool bringing forth new dangers. So, a museum of accidents would provide 'a public platform for what never gets exposed, but exposes us endlessly to major hazards' (p55). In the manner of simulators that prepare pilots or drivers for unexpected situations, the museum would have a positive function. But when it comes to television the benefits of such a museum seem less obvious. With all those programmes on crashes and pile-ups, drawing on tapes from motorway monitoring cameras, instruction gives way to the pleasures of spectacular entertainment.

In focusing on television, Virilio does not take his eye off concerns with the speed of visual and martial technologies that have consistently occupied his work. The small screen also includes the computer terminals confounding here and there with electronic instantaneity, reducing 'the *optical thickness* of our planet to nothing' (p47). Indeed, war, exemplified by the 'first televisual war' waged in the Gulf, has become 'inseparable from its cathodic framing', whether in the control of smart weaponry or on the 'media front' across which it is relayed (p24). Through techniques of miniaturization, war becomes 'miniscule', reduced to the size of an image (26). The practice of war, its horizons increasingly delimited and expanded according to technological determinations, lies at the vanguard of a planetary virtualisation and dematerialisation. Virilio's final potted history of shifting trends in martial weaponry and tactics, from visual proximity and its appropriate hardware to vectors of rapid delivery, describes a '*dematerialisation* of armaments, *depersonalisation* of command, *derealisation* of the aims of war' that correspond to a more general supplanting of the human-centred agencies of democratic government, economic planning and social cohesion (p88). The omnipresence

of the small screen transforms relations between local and global events. It embraces war, riots (Soweto and Handsworth in 1985) and terror.

An 'age of imbalance' caused by the absence of Cold War comfort has seen an extension of the media front, with nuclear proliferation, miniaturised, mobile explosive devices and smart weaponry reshaping conventional warfare and its terroristic counterpart. Small screens play a crucial role in the 'escalation in the kind of military-political action that is based simultaneously on a limited number of actors and guaranteed media coverage' (p19). A 'new era of terrorism' arrives: the 'historic attack on the World Trade Center marks its beginning'. Virilio is discussing the first attack, in 1993, but his analysis resonates strongly with the more recent event. The implications of such an 'economical' attack – in which one man can wage total war – are understood as assaults on the 'world marketplace' with 'organised terrorism' determined to use the media front to its advantage (pp20-21) Virilio's cautions, too, are telling: if such operations proliferate there will, he writes, be the possibility 'of inflicting incredible damage not only on the innocent victims but also, and especially, on democracy'. Such 'criminal' acts, he goes on, 'cannot continue to be downplayed for fear of causing panic for the inhabitants of the great metropolises' (p19). With a canny eye to the emerging pattern of terrorism, he closes: 'in the end, you don't need much money if you have enough charisma, religious or otherwise, to buy a band of paramilitary assassins' (p22).

While Virilio's reading sketches out a trajectory that has become much clearer the second time around, there are elements of his analysis that jar with his invocations of innocent victims, criminality and democracy. If the world has been so transformed by the military-information complex, then, in Virilio's favourite phrase, such terms can 'no longer' apply. Elsewhere in the book he notes the problems that communications technology poses for both strategic planning and democratic participation, and in the essay on weapons technology that immediately follows his account of the attack on the World Trade Center he asks: 'how can we hope for long to distinguish between *actor* and *spectator*, *soldier* and *civilian*? Combining and, indeed, confusing information systems with systems for controlling public opinion become inevitable' (p27). Given the importance of the media front to both military strategists and terrorists, distinctions between combatants and civilians are elided in the pyrotechnical economy of the media spectacle. No one any longer, on or off screen, may be allowed to lay claim to innocence.

While the small screen, the central node of this collection of pieces, forms the window on a landscape of war and information articulated through numerous incidental details and minute facts, the questions of time that have regularly been posed in Virilio's work are, in a rare engagement with bigger pictures or grand narratives, extended to encompass some serious consideration of history. With the small screen's delivery of instantaneous communication, 'history has just crashed into the wall of time'. Real time effaces traditional temporality, leaving the Western world in a period 'in which

everything has suddenly plunged headlong into a discontinuity that has destroyed the age-old agreement of tenses' (pxi). The effects are not what might be expected; instead of a fear of the future – the conventional technophobic response – Virilio argues that there is a pervasive 'fear of the past' weighing down the present and disabling any desire to look forward with any kind of optimism: 'the recession of history entails the retreat of knowledge, the retirement of progress', and a corresponding loss of political and ethical ideals (pxii). A very modern figure presides over this loss: Walter Benjamin's 'angel of history', wings outspread but facing backwards, the wreckage of a single catastrophe at his feet. For Virilio, the angel's attitude is now 'the vision of each and every one of us': from now on, he declares, 'the acceleration for the reality of time causes revulsion at the being-here-present. Like fright, which results in the body's retreat, evaporation of hope in the future causes us to regress, inducing permanent resentment' (pxiii). Not a pretty sight, then, this angel of history that everyone has become.

Virilio, of course, does not endorse this vision of past, present or future. His work is devoted to enacting 'a radical reversal in perspective' (xiii). A return to a critique of modernity? A recuperation of the humanity (and the divinity) eclipsed by technological reproduction? A reversal of an entire military-technoscientific-hypercapitalist logic whose hold seems virtually total? In this respect, it is curious, even mildly ironic, that Virilio should invoke Benjamin, the influential critic of modernity who did not survive its most harrowing period. On another level, however, Benjamin's project, with its examination of modernity entwining the visual innovations of photography and cinema with the experience of urban life and industrial production, forms a significant precursor to Virilio's work. Where McLuhan receives short shrift – 'the bucolic Jean-Jacques Rousseau of digital times' (p3) – Benjamin's darker explorations of the psychological and political structures of shocked modernity remain instructive in charting the move towards post- or hypermodern conditions. Neither historical nor futurological, Virilio's writing moves backwards in order to probe the possibility of progress in the face of the coming of instant information. Here important questions are posed: 'can one democratise ubiquity, instantaneity, immediacy, which are precisely the prerogatives of the divine – in other words, of autocracy?' (p32). Neither the answer to, nor the audience of, this question is clear: 'what will happened when we are all hooked up by cable ... What will we look forward to when we no longer need to look forward in order to arrive?' (65) Indeed, if overload has already set in, then the response may be predictable: 'stop putting your calling card in my mailbox, it's already too full of bills and brochures for me to go near it' (p64). Virilio's aims may already be unattainable, overwhelmed by the very technologic he is so concerned to critique. Is there an audience with enough of the political or critical energy left to envisage any future at all? Already retrained, stupefied and hyperactivated by technological assaults on the sensorium, his potential readers may never get round to looking at the calling card that he has delivered. Too busy, instead, watching TV.

CAN-DO ALIENATION

Andrew Wylie

Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, London, Faber, 2000
274pp, £12.99 paperback.

Aleks Sierz's book couples a particular strength with a potentially undermining weakness. What matters about this book is that it provides a vehicle for bringing together Sierz's valuable considered reflections on a number of plays of the 1990s. Sierz's contention that there took place a great and largely positive change in the theatre of the 1990s from that of the '80s is compelling. He maintains that 'in-yer-face' theatre is comparable with the new wave of the 1950s, and his placing of Sarah Kane's *Blasted* at the heart of in-yer-face then intriguingly establishes Kane as the John Osborne of the 1990s. However, the book does not convincingly provide a definition and account of in-yer-face theatre as a significant coherent milestone in theatrical history.

Sierz tells us in his introduction that he is concerned primarily to provide an account of 'writers who first came to prominence in the nineties', and 'a personal selection of those writers and those plays that have had the most impact during an exciting decade'. Sierz's theatrical antennae work better than almost anyone else's in London, so it is thoroughly interesting to know what he likes best and why. But I remain unconvinced by his broader claims for the existence of in-yer-face theatre as a coherent corpus of work. And while asserting that in-yer-face theatre has established a new aesthetic, Sierz never offers much of a definition of this, beyond its being 'experiential, not speculative'. Even that rather broad and shallow claim he then further dilutes by seeking to include a category of the 'cooler in-yer-face', in which plays 'mediate the disturbing power of extreme emotions by using a number of distancing devices'.

The insistence on confining himself to consideration of writers whose work was first produced in the 1990s is also problematic, I think. For Sierz has to acknowledge the significance of at least Caryl Churchill, Howard Barker and Harold Pinter - which he does pretty extensively. But that acknowledgement implies a genealogy that leads into earlier decades with sufficient directness to rather undermine the contention that in-yer-face theatre exists as a particularly 1990s phenomenon. Meanwhile, Sierz's archetype of the new young playwright of the 1990s is interesting but problematic. He portrays an individual in the peculiar position of being alienated but imbued with a can-do ethos, unconvinced that late-20th-century Britain has a culture worth engaging with, but willing and able to write

plays and get them produced, even while presumably doubting the existence of a responsive audience. But by no means all of the important new writers of the 1990s fit Sierz's more elaborate post-cold-war post-Thatcherite archetype: Kane, perhaps; Ridley maybe with a squeeze; Ravenhill no; Nagy not remotely; others maybe, subject to discussion.

For Sierz, the central figures of 1990s playwriting were Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill and Anthony Neilson. While there is room for debate on this, Sierz's winner-picking is generally spot on. It is good, for example, to see the talent of somebody like Philip Ridley acknowledged. But then I am disappointed to note how little Sierz says about *The Pitchfork Disney*, to my mind Ridley's most compelling work. Similarly with Phyllis Nagy's *Never Land*, which is granted two and a half short sentences, in contrast with the more substantial, enthusiastic and illuminating review of the play that Sierz originally wrote in *Tribune*. But the scant attention paid to these two plays is compensated for by the generous space allotted to others. Two examples are Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* and Jez Butterworth's *Mojo*. The elapse of time has clearly allowed Sierz's enthusiasm for these two plays to blossom since he originally reviewed them in 1996. But his attitude towards them in this book is illustrative of a fundamental problem with the conceptualization of in-yer-face theatre. *Shopping and Fucking* is widely held to have been a milestone in the theatre of the 1990s. Ravenhill is quoted in the book describing the play as 'an implicit critique of Thatcher's dictum that "there is no such thing as society"'. In contrast, *Mojo*'s 'lack of heart and moral emptiness' is problematic for Sierz - and indeed leads to the view that it is a much slighter play than *Shopping and Fucking*. The problem, though, is that both the social critique of plays like *Shopping and Fucking* and the moral emptiness of plays like *Mojo* seem to be prayed in aid by Sierz as defining features of in-yer-face theatre.

What, then, of the 1990s? Does the decade have the theatrical significance that Sierz contends for it in making the comparison with the 1950s? Well, yes and no. The way in which new writing for the theatre in the 1990s infused new life, challenge, and social comment presents a marked contrast with the theatre of the 1980s. However, it may be that British theatre in the 1990s did no more than regain a confidence and vitality that had already existed in the post-war era, until it was poisoned by the peculiar ethos of the 1980s. The 1980s, after all, was in many ways a miserable, reactionary decade in Britain and the USA, a fact that was fairly thoroughly reflected in the theatre of the time. Sierz does indeed identify an important group of plays and playwrights, operating at an exceptionally vital and exciting time in the theatre - primarily the mid-1990s. What I don't think he quite succeeds in demonstrating, however, is the existence of a genre called 'in-yer-face theatre', nor the case for the 1990s as having presented theatrical conditions that were unique, as opposed to just being invigorating. That said, Sierz's own views on individual plays are stimulating and readable, while his account of critical responses at large makes this book an extremely worthwhile document.

THE AESTHETICS OF UNDERACHIEVEMENT

Herman Rapaport

Julian Stallabrass, *High Art Lite: British Art in the 1990s*, London, Verso, 1999, 342pp; £12 paperback.

John C. Welchman, *Art After Appropriation: Essays on Art in the 1990s*, Amsterdam, G+B Arts International, 2001, 306pp; £19.99 paperback.

Although much remains unclear, it's evident that the 1990s was the emotional downer that followed the intellectual high of the 1980s. Recall that humanists were insisting that theory, plus politics, plus the arts were going to radically transform the 'disciplines' and that the 1990s was supposed to be an intellectual golden age, given the triumphs of multiculturalism, queer theory, feminism, and the rest. It was a good fantasy. But the reality was more along the lines of a Karen Finley performance art piece. (Screaming:) 'So I took too many sleeping pills and nothing happened. So I put a gun to my head and NOTHING HAPPENED! So I put my head in the oven and NOTHING HAPPENED! So I fucked you all night long and NOTHING HAPPENED!' That was from a performance in Iowa City back at the turn of the 1990s, called 'The Constant State of Desire', and what stands out, of course, is its refrain, because it's such a dead ringer for the decade of the 1990s.¹ Consider that after all the energy put into postmodernism, multiculturalism, and so-called theory; after all the forced retirements of the uncool senior colleagues; after all the canon wars; after all the consciousness raising and program making in women's studies, ethnic studies, cultural studies; and after all the politically correct unpleasantness that made life miserable for everyone, when the 1990s came, NOTHING HAPPENED!

This was psychologically reinforced by world politics. For years we had been told (by governments and Hollywood) that the Cold War was going to eventually erupt into an Armageddon followed by nuclear winter. Although everyone is thankful that this didn't happen, being the psychological creatures we are there was nevertheless something anti-climactic about having lived through a decades-long false alarm and, in the end, being handed a third world Russia (replete with Mafia) in place of a proper confrontation with and victory over the Empire of Evil. This absence of a sense of historical triumph or accomplishment on the part of the West meant that there was something psychologically unreal about what had happened east of the Elbe. Some sort of massive bankruptcy had taken place that caught the West by surprise and that therefore went under-represented. (Just ask yourself, on what day and year did the Soviet Union cease to exist? And if you can't

¹ Out from Under, ed. L. Champagne, New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1990, p61.

remember, what does that tell you?)

Psychoanalytically speaking, after having introjected the Cold War into our fantasy life, the Lacanian aphanisis of this imaginary object left a psychic hole in the collective consciousness of the West. What we were left with were free floating anxieties and (now) irrelevant imaginings. What was even worse, however, was that if our most terrible fears weren't going to be realized, we Westerners weren't going to be compensated by entering a better world either. That was the depressing lesson of the former Yugoslavia and the Gulf War: in the aftermath of our biggest existential threat being removed, nothing had really happened for the better.

It's in this context that I think we ought to read Julian Stallabrass's *High Art Lite*, a book about British art in the 1990s. Basically, Stallabrass is trying to come to terms with a young generation of British artists that no one seems to appreciate very much, though they are, as some have said, a group that easily competes with other major national traditions (especially that of the USA). Apparently, young British artists have managed a curious conflation of detached flatness and distance with out-of-control rage and hostility. In looking at Warhol or Lichtenstein, back in the 1960s, I never got the impression that these artists were mad at anyone. Even John Chamberlain's car wreck sculptures seemed quite unaccusative. But as Stallabrass shows, high art lite is another matter. It's the product of a certain deprivation or poverty (of talent, spirit, willpower, genius, intelligence) that mirrors (or is supposed to mirror) a culture that isn't very keen on making life particularly nice for anyone. Rather, the world out of which high art lite comes is a mean and unredeeming world (of train wrecks, sacked government officials, race riots, sleazy newspapers, CCTV, and a Royal House in gross disorder). In other words, there's nothing lite about it. The strange twist, however, is that high art lite doesn't seek to rectify anything, but simply iterates what is. No moral battle to redeem the hearts and minds of the public is even attempted. Such art is not trying to shake us out of our lethargy, because its makers don't seem to think there's any hope for us. So we're back to Finley in terms of nothing happening, which is to say, with a zero degree of morality, artistry, conceptualisation, and who knows what else. It's all well and good for 'artist' Tracey Emin to put up a commercially bought tent, the inside of which contains stitched-in texts referring to all the people she has slept with; it's another for us to realize that this sort of thing requires zero artistic talent and that conceptually it's not even very imaginative or morally very edifying (*Everyone I Have Ever Slept With [1963-1995]*). Stallabrass's argument is that this sort of art isn't something we should write off as a loss, because its being a loss is precisely its point. In other words, in Emin and high art lite generally, the spectacle of inadequacy is the name of the game.

Yes, it's all about lack, and this is something Stallabrass underscores: high art lite doesn't have anything to say to postmodern theories because it's taking place out of the theory-box altogether. In a word, it's theory-

hostile (aggressively anti-intellectual; anti-intelligent; anti-educational; anti-cultural). Chris Ofili's paintings, for example, aren't postcolonially correct. They are made with elephant dung (*Painting With Shit On It* [1993]) and hence mix abjection with aggression, largely around issues of race and culture that Stallabrass calls 'quite hard to interpret' [108]. Stallabrass argues that Ofili's work ambiguates art and decoration, abjection and beauty, social insult and social protest, though no new ground is supposed to be broken by any of this. The big problem is not the ambiguity (the deconstruction-lite of value) but the look of the paintings: they're quite indistinguishable from kitsch, something that Stallabrass tries to wriggle out of, but can't. It's this blatant foray into inadequacy and stupidity (kitsch, bric-a-brac, tacky home-made stuff) that makes everyone stop short, as if inadequacy were the greatest transgression of all (is it?).

No less important is that Stallabrass notices (and how could he miss it?) that aspects of high art lite seem to come straight out of yob-culture, which, at the very least, means that it is highly anti-social, unlike the art we got so used to seeing in New York's Soho where artistic aggressivity was watered down, if not entirely defanged, by political correctness: moralizing sentimentality dressed up to look like art. If you look at Cindy Sherman's (by now) rocky-horror-show idea of art, or the moralizing stick-people of Keith Haring, or the school-girlish goody-two-shoes social criticism of Jenny Holzer, you'll see why young British artists appear to be so successful: their work comes across as authentic (unhypocritical) and raw (crude, blatant, ugly, desperate). There's much of this in Jake and Dinos Chapman's *Fuckface Twin* (1995), which sort of defies description, though Douglas Fogle made a noble effort when he wrote: 'Put simply, their work is shit'. Actually, the work is a sequel to Hans Bellmer's perverse dolls - in the Chapmans' case, kitschy plastic-looking monsters of sexual displacement and bodily conflation (which, at the end of the day, look more like garden gnomes than not). The irony, as I see it, is that the Chapmans have made a success out of recycling an idea (Bellmer's) with wilfully disappointing results (silliness). Still, it's this 'let down effect' that requires some serious thought, since that seems to be the core of this aesthetic.

In fact, something quite depressing comes across in many of such works. It's as if we're dealing with the depressive position in Melanie Klein: mama is dead and baby can't nurse. Apparently high art lite is deprived (conceptually anorexic), which means that it doesn't seem to have taken enough in from the culture to do anything with. Because it refuses intellectual nutrition (remember, it's out of the theory-box) it is akin to what Kafka once called hunger artistry. In other words, there's asceticism and stoicism in this tale. But, as the Chapmans show, there's schizophrenia in there too. Stallabrass doesn't take matters this far. He sees the deprivation as vague accusation or weak critique: its address isn't focused but tends to implicate all sorts of possible interpretations. This is why Stallabrass holds out for the virtues of ambiguity, an Empsonian reading that rehabilitates this art from

its low profile aesthetic. I admire Stallabrass's optimism, but I'd look elsewhere for answers.

At the risk of invoking the baldest cliché of the current British art scene, how *would* you explain Damien Hirst's emblematic work of the art lite movement: the carcass of a shark swimming in the dead zone of a tank filled with formaldehyde? Don't all of his suspended specimens draw out this depressive position of the baby that can't nurse, of the dead mother upon whom we cannot feed imaginatively, but from whom we must recoil, and in horror? There's no nourishment for you here, the works of Hirst announce. Stallabrass knows that this art is nihilistic, but I feel that his analysis never really gets to the bottom of the issue, which isn't about the politics of art in the UK (his major concern) but about an anorexia of the intellect and the spirit, in short, a depressive position that isn't negotiable, because the artists don't seem to be capable of feeling or thinking anything else. Moreover, I think Stallabrass is on the wrong track in nationalizing this art movement to the extent that he does. Thomas Scheibitz (German), Neo Rauch (German), Michael Raedecker (Dutch), Rob Pruitt (American), Laura Owens (American), Yoshitomo Nara (Japanese), and Mona Marzouk (Egyptian) are but a very short list of artists of the high art lite variety who come at it from a number of different directions.² What characterizes all of them tends to be a mixture of muted colours, clichéd representations (mass media images, oftentimes), and a certain blankness or lack of expressivity that indicates a painstaking underachievement. In my view the godfather of this sort of art is Sigmar Polke, perhaps the most significant European painter around today.

² These artists are included in *New Perspectives in Painting*, ed. V. Breuvar et al., London: Phaedon, 2002.

In the second book under review, *Art After Appropriation* by John C. Welchman, we actually revisit the world of the dead (really, the dying) mother, which is to say, mother Russia in its incarnation as Soviet Union in the period of *glasnost*. Welchman at least can actually remember when the end of the Soviet Union happened. Speaking of an exhibition that took place in the Soviet Union in 1989, Welchman writes: 'the historical moment in which the exhibitions were staged is crucial. Late 1989 was the heyday of *glasnost*, the very last period in which it still seemed possible that the political mechanisms of the USSR could be opened out on the basis of a liberalised, capitalised, but still Party-based and centripetal model of Socialist polity. It would be nearly two years before the *putsch* of August 1991 precipitated the final dissolution of both Party and Union'. Come to think of it, I remember seeing the *putsch* on CNN. But it was only after reading Welchman that I realize what I saw (this was my 'recovered memory' moment).

In Welchman's 1994 *Third Text* article 'Photographies, Counter-revolution and Second Worlds: Allegories by Design', the issue, as throughout his collection of essays, is that of anti-appropriation (of anti-interpretability and anti-assimilation). In the *glasnost* period one is seeing an empire on the brink of dissolution suddenly trying to recover its socialist realist past and make sense of it. But did they and do we know what it is that is being looked at? It's

not that we lack content for content analysis, but that somehow that content gets recontextualized in all sorts of ways that estrange it and fail to take account of it, perhaps because it is inherently unaccountable (i.e. absurd) in some very major respects. Then, too, there is the matter of how the Soviets displayed art in the late 1980s, the force behind these displays being to somehow make up for lost time (decades of brutal repression). This seems to be the last moment, within the context of Soviet style socialism, that some historical self-reflexion was possible, and yet, as Welchman argues, how inappropriate and chaotic! Judging from the description of an exhibition of art depicting the Khrushchev era, the experience must have been one of decontextualization, fragmentation, faux-history, sentimental reconstruction, and so on. This is history as jumble sale, with hucksters snapping up this and that in order to recycle the Stalin years - as art. As Welchman suggests, this was the unintelligible debris of a tumultuous and unprocessed past, just as the Soviet Union was about to extinguish itself forever.

The depressive position is self-evident here too, in that we're dealing with massive and prolonged events of collective trauma that haven't been 'worked through' (as the Freudians say). And this, of course, is in part what Welchman means by post-appropriation, the inaccessibility of the past in the very presence of its *Darstellung*. Whereas Germany has gone quite far in terms of its *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* ('mastering the past'), the Soviet Union had hardly begun to come to terms with its past before the *putsch* that erased access to it. Today there already seems to be an infinite distance between the present and the past. Again, there is this matter of a hole in public consciousness that we cannot mourn and that plays into a psycho-historical moment of depression. Consider China, and you'll see the healthier option that its CP took.

Like Stallabrass, Welchmann has written an exploratory account of art in the 1990s, and it would take a very lengthy review to begin to scratch the surface of it, though the interest in the late Soviet Union gives us a good glimpse into his thesis, namely, that as in the East, Western artists, too, are appropriating the past in ways that either bar or expose our inability to work through (interpret) our relation to past tradition. Stallabrass and Welchman converge, somewhat, in suggesting that instead of thinking in terms of the postmodern, we could be more attuned to thinking in terms of post-traumatic stress and the depressive position of underachievement. This is as apropos of British art as it is of various of Welchman's topics - Steve Fagin's faux-history videos (corrupted memory, inaccessible facts); Hock, Sisco, and Avalos' faux economy (of worthless/depressed money); Barbara Bloom's vacuous 'Reign of Narcissism' (aggressive interior decoration meets the faux-self); death of the cube (post-minimalist repetitions of cube-ism). Of course, all this is but a small part of the 1990s puzzle. Over time we'll see more. For the time being, though, it's good to see strong books appearing that will help us grapple with what I would deem to be the least memorable decade of the twentieth century.

THE TASTE FOR CONTROVERSY

Manu Samriti Chander

Dave Beech and John Roberts, *The Philistine Controversy*, Verso, London, 2002, 288pp; £16.00 paperback; £40.00 hardback.

Modern aesthetics has never not been a field of 'controversy'. When Kant defined aesthetic judgment as that which cannot be objectively validated, as that which 'exacts agreement from every one' only conditionally, he introduced into aesthetic discourse a potential for dispute that would ultimately serve to distinguish the field from those arenas in which the objective universality of determinate concepts is taken for granted.¹ While the field of political economy, for example, turned increasingly toward a discourse of objective 'value', aesthetics developed its own theories about subjective, disputable (though certainly not relativistic) 'taste'. In fact, it is precisely the potential for dispute that underlies the whole slippery field of aesthetics: what the 'founder of modern aesthetics' actually founded, in Samuel Weber's formulation, was a field of continual 'foundering'.²

And the leap from dispute to controversy, as history has shown, is not a great one: in the *Biographia Literaria*, for example, Coleridge refers to the acrimonious arguments surrounding the aesthetic value of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* as a 'whole long-continued controversy'.³ This was almost twenty years after Wordsworth's collection was first published and the first reviews printed in the pages of various London journals.

That it has taken significantly less time for the debates sparked by Dave Beech and John Roberts's 'Spectres of the Aesthetic', which was published in *New Left Review* in the late 1990s, to be labelled a 'controversy' is indicative, perhaps, of our postmodern lust for the word, an obsession evidenced by the fact that, in the same year *The Philistine Controversy* came out, roughly a hundred other books with the term 'controversy' in the title were also published. Given this apparent banalisation of the term, we might feel compelled to question the extent to which the essays collected in *The Philistine Controversy* can be considered 'controversial'. Gail Day, in perhaps the shrewdest essay in the collection - which includes 'Spectres of the Aesthetic', critical responses by Malcolm Bull, Andrew Bowie, and J.M. Bernstein, as well as Beech and Roberts's responses to these responses - offers some useful insight into the matter when she identifies within the exchange between Beech and Roberts and their critics an 'absent core': insofar as 'the participants are talking about different things, and on separate grounds,' she writes, 'the "philistine debate" never was a debate' (p233).

1. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, James Creed Meredith (trans), Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1952, p82.

2. See Samuel Weber, 'The Foundering of Aesthetics: Thoughts on the Current State of Comparative Literature', in *The Comparative Perspective on Literature: Approaches to Theory and Practice*, Clayton Koelb and Susan Noakes (eds), Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1988, pp57-72.

3. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria Vol. II*, J. Shawcross (ed), Oxford University Press, London 1958, p8.

Day's observation, sound as it is, might itself be qualified by distinguishing between the terms 'debate' and 'controversy'. Coleridge, at a time when aesthetic controversies abounded just as multiple readerships for English literature were being formed in opposition to one another, observes that 'Controversy is not seldom excited in consequence of the disputants attaching each a different meaning to the same word'.⁴ In the case of the 'philistine controversy', there are in fact a number of disputed terms, each of which seems to function differently from one essay to the next. 'Art', 'aesthetics', 'value', 'politics', 'identity', and, of course, 'philistine' and 'philistinism'; each of these remains relatively abstract despite its centrality to the discussion at hand. Again, this lack of precision may be held to be symptomatic of aesthetic discourse in general, which seems to draw its energy from the absence of objective definitions and which seems to rely, therefore, on the potential for controversy (one is reminded of the way the term 'realism' seems to mean differently for each of the disputants involved in the realism debates of the 1930s, 40s, and 50s).

4. *Biographia
Literaria Vol. II*, p10.

Perhaps it is because of the absence of a fixed terminology in the philistine controversy that much of the collection is descriptive and explanatory. Like Day's analysis of the debate that 'never was a debate', Stewart Martin's introduction aims to identify the various contours of the positions voiced in the collection. In particular, he clarifies the manner in which Beech and Roberts are mobilising the concept of the philistine - the figure systematically marginalised by aesthetic discourse - against what they perceive to be dominant versions of Left cultural criticism. Martin astutely notes that their project does not merely 'propose a simple affirmation of the philistine' (p4), but rather, sees the philistine and philistinism as enabling a particular kind of dialectical cultural criticism, a criticism that engages with the very processes by which modern subjects are constituted.

In order to recover philistinism from the margins of aesthetic discourse, Beech and Roberts begin in 'Spectres of the Aesthetic' by positioning themselves against theorists such as Bowie and Bernstein, whom they see as representative of a problematic 'new aestheticism'. The new aesthetes, according to Beech and Roberts, continue in the tradition of Adorno and Marcuse by conceiving the aesthetic realm as the site of an ethics that is 'transcendentally emancipatory', which blinds them to the inescapable pressures of partisan politics. The critique voiced here, then, is one which recognises a longstanding conception of aesthetic autonomy that simultaneously endorses political absenteeism and derogates philistine approaches to art. Beech and Roberts thus proceed with the three interrelated goals of rethinking the notion of autonomy while preserving the category of aesthetic as a relatively determinate field, emphasising the inevitable relationship between aesthetics and partisan politics, and reconceptualising the philistine as a means of 'bring[ing] to bear on art and aesthetics the cost of their exclusions' (p45).

One of their strongest allies in this endeavour is, strangely enough,

Adorno, whose model of dialectical autonomy seems antithetical to Beech and Roberts's political project, and whose stance on philistinism is clear enough from any number of moments in, say, *Aesthetic Theory* or *Minima Moralia*. Arguing that critics such as Bowie and Bernstein offer a model of Adorno 'minus social theory', Beech and Roberts point to the inextricability of Adorno's aesthetics from his social theory, claiming that 'Adorno was not one of those modernists who regarded art's autonomy as a total disengagement from the social, yet his modernism would not permit these permeations [of the social] to enter art except as configurations of form' (p42).

The reading of Adorno here is quite thought-provoking, but its suggestiveness gets somewhat lost in the broader context of Beech and Roberts's argument. Rather than pursue the manner by which their understanding of the social and the aesthetic in Adorno might inform the field of aesthetics, and rather than explore the uneasy relationship between Adornian aesthetics and postmodernity, the authors turn their attention to Adorno's construction of philistinism in order to suggest that he ultimately fails to investigate the usefulness of the category of the philistine by privileging the intellectual labour of aesthetic judgment over the philistine's 'voluptuous pleasures and inexpert forms of attention' (p44). In response to this crucial omission, Beech and Roberts suggest that we might, by paying attention to the philistine's particular 'bodily' relation to art, open up 'the question of aesthetics and the body to the practical, plural and conflictual world which the body inhabits' (p46).

What we are left with at the end of 'Spectres of the Aesthetic', and what Beech and Roberts's critics pick up on, is a model of philistinism that is as vague as it is provocative. In his response, 'The Ecstasy of Philistinism', Malcolm Bull attempts to clarify the term 'philistine' by offering a short history of the word as it is used by Matthew Arnold, Nietzsche, and others. Arguing that the philistine has never been constructed in such a way that it might serve as the negative, oppositional force that might revise or redraw the boundaries of the aesthetic, Bull suggests that philistinism ultimately threatens to annihilate art rather than engage it dialectically, and that 'although the resulting void may yet contain some positive value, that value need not be aesthetic' (p72). It is unfortunate, perhaps, that Beech and Roberts choose not to engage with Bull's argument in their response to their critics, 'Tolerating Impurities: An Ontology, Genealogy and Defence of Philistinism'. Claiming that Bull's depiction of philistinism utterly ignores their sense of the philistine as a figure 'deeply entangled in the alienated conditions of art's production and reception' (p126), they overlook the fact that his essay actually speaks directly to their conception of the philistine as 'the definitional other of art and aesthetics' (p45) - thereby missing an opportunity to consolidate their argument.

Beech and Roberts do actively address the criticisms voiced in Andrew Bowie's 'Confessions of a "New Aesthete": A Response to the "New

Philistines””, and J.M. Bernstein’s ‘Against Voluptuous Bodies: Of Satiation Without Happiness’. While somewhat different in their approach to ‘Spectres of the Aesthetic’ - Bowie focusing on its misrepresentation of the relation between aesthetics and subjectivity, Bernstein on, among other things, its sense of social theory - both take issue with Beech and Roberts’s diagnosis of the ‘new aestheticism’, and both underscore the importance of epistemology and human agency in thinking through modern aesthetics. While Bowie and Bernstein seem primarily concerned with defending themselves from Beech and Roberts’s often reductive claims about their aesthetic investments, they also offer some remarkable insights into the limitations of Beech and Roberts’s model of philistinism, or the various hurdles it still has to face. Indeed, it is because of the pressures placed on their work by critics such as Bowie and Bernstein that Beech and Roberts’s ‘Tolerating Impurities’ is more successful than their earlier ‘Spectres of the Aesthetic’, at least insofar as it clarifies such issues as the ontological and epistemological status of the philistine and the relation between philistine modes of attention and contemporary pluralist theory.

Nevertheless, many questions remain for the reader after the *New Left Review* debates. What precisely is the relationship between Beech and Roberts’s philistinism (or, for that matter, the so-called ‘new aestheticism’) and cultural studies, or the production of contemporary art? Which political agendas are ultimately at stake in an aesthetics of philistinism? By which methodologies might philistine modes of attention proceed? It is with these and related issues in mind that the second part of the book, ‘Philistine Modes of Attention’ - with essays by Noël Burch, Esther Leslie, Gail Day, Malcolm Quinn, and, with the final word on the matter, Beech and Roberts - proceeds. For those already familiar with the earlier essays by Beech and Roberts and their critics, the collection of ‘test cases’ at the end of *The Philistine Controversy* will likely be of greater interest, as they are generally quite nuanced, especially in ways that the *New Left Review* essays are lacking. Of particular note are Day’s critical assessment of the place of Adorno in the philistine debates in her essay ‘When Art Works Crack[le]’, and Quinn’s reading of ‘Tolerating Impurities’ against Eagleton’s *The Idea of Culture*. Moments such as these demonstrate the potential usefulness of Beech and Roberts’s intervention as well as the importance of the questions posed by their critics, and ultimately seem to suggest that, whatever the practicality or even theoretical validity of an aesthetics of philistinism, the controversy that arose from the debates might yet yield the sort of productive uncertainty that keeps us interrogating the aesthetic and its relation to the social world.

If not - if the essays here, to borrow a phrase from Adorno, ‘age, grow cold, and die’ - then perhaps they will nevertheless remind us of the uncomfortable situation of aesthetics at the end of the twentieth century, or, more precisely, of the specific pressures that placed aesthetics - which is always uncomfortable, uneasy, ‘controversial’ - in such an awkward position.⁵ Hal Foster, in an essay from 1983, voiced a concern about the validity of

5. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Robert Hullot-Kentor (trans), Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, 1997, p4.

6. Hal Foster, 'Postmodernism: A Preface', *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Hal Foster (ed), Bay Press, Port Townsend, WA, 1983, pxiii.

aesthetic discourse in the then current state of social affairs: 'Is the model of subjective taste,' he asked, 'not threatened by mass mediation, or that of universal vision by the rise of other cultures?'⁶ *The Philistine Controversy* makes evident a certain shift in thinking between the time of Foster's essay and the turn of the century - a shift that emphasised the possibilities of the aesthetic over the impossibility of 'subjective taste' or 'universal vision'. Thus the 'philistine' debates, and the ensuing attempts to think through the validity of each position, demonstrate an awareness of such issues as the utter permeation of the culture industry into the aesthetic realm and the increasing sensitivity toward marginalised subjects and their particular 'modes of attention', alongside a mistrust in the notion that these issues signal the end of aesthetic theory. The book does not rehearse the old debates about, for example, universalism versus relativism, which were common enough a decade earlier. Rather - at least at its finest moments - it operates within a certain tension between the poles that once were and often still are staunchly defended by one group or another. Whether this tension will continue to generate new theories of the aesthetic is, of course, difficult to say; that it did in the 1990s seems, in light of the essays included here, fairly clear.