Walter, Leni, Walt and Mickey

Laura Marcus

Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde*, London, Verso, 2002, 344pp; £20 hardback.

Flatland was the title of a novel of the 1880s written by English headmaster Edwin Abbott Abbott to explore and explain geometry, by means of a fantastical adventure story in which the worlds of different dimensions (from zero to three) meet and clash. In *Hollywood Flatlands*, Esther Leslie charts the ways in which the two-dimensional world of the animated cartoons produced in the early decades of the twentieth century became subordinated to an illusionistic realism and depth. Walt Disney's 'fight against flatness' in films from the late 1930s onwards, she suggests, was part and parcel of the cartoon's increasing self-distancing from the art of the avant-garde, 'which takes fragmentation and disintegration into its law of form, making clear how constructed not only it is but also the social world - ripe for transformation'.

Such an account of modernist self-reflexivity may be a familiar one, but there is nothing obvious or derivative about the ways in which the arguments of *Hollywood Flatlands* proceed. The book starts and ends with the expressed desire to challenge facile assumptions about an irreconcilable divide between high and mass culture in modernist contexts. The animated cartoon - emblematic of 'popular culture' – fascinated modernist theorists and artists, shaping their theories and art in its own shifting and subversive forms. A similar point is made by Paul Wells in his interesting study *Animation and America* (Edinburgh University Press, 2002), in which he asserts that animation 'is a child of the modernist principle ... the bastard child of [America's] own avant garde' (9). The model of filiation is not particularly useful here, but the broader point stands: cartoons are exemplary instances of, in Esther Leslie's phrase, a 'demotic modernism'. As she argues, the relations between intellectuals and popular culture in the early twentieth century was *productive*, 'in the sense that both intellectuals and mass culture producers recognised, in some way, that all was to play for, that transformation was a virtue, a motive and a motif, that dissolution of form, including the form of the mass itself, was on the agenda, indeed that there was a chance to return to the drawing board of social formation'. The question of the utopianism implied here is fully addressed in a subsequent chapter on 'Mickey Mouse, Utopia and Walter Benjamin'. In its first appearance, however, the set of claims is part of a polemical argument that the productivity of modernist/mass cultural relationships was replaced by a

postmodern cultural theory which merely affirms an existing mass culture, rather than finding in that culture, as did modernism, its own critique.

This argument might be held to merit question, or at least, discussion. In fact, given that Leslie's book pursues neither animation nor cultural theory much beyond the 1930s, it receives little of either. Fortunately, *Hollywood Flatlands* is exceptionally productive, to borrow its own term, in its exploration of film and critical/cultural theory leading up to the mid-twentieth century. There are absorbing discussions of pre-cinematic animated cartoons; of the relationship between animated films and the 'absolute film' of the European avant-garde; of film and the rise of Fascism; of colour theory and film. Conceptually, the study pushes far beyond most of the existing literature on animation. Leslie draws on Goethe, Marx and Freud in her analyses, but turns most often to the writings of Adorno, Kracauer, and, above all, Benjamin. She explores the part played by optics in Benjamin's work, his fascination with children's books and toys, and his interest in the nineteenth-century caricaturist Grandville, in whose animating fantasies Benjamin found a relationship to Marx's theory of fetishism and whose graphic transmutation skills were his legacy to later animators.

There is also a tracing-through of the many, though dispersed, references to Disney, and to Mickey Mouse in particular, in Benjamin's writings. Leslie reads the different versions of his most cited essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility' - revised predominantly at the urging of Adorno - in relation to the issue of animation. In the first version of the essay, Benjamin suggested that animation was the most legitimate film form, in its abstraction from a recorded reality and its foregrounding of the graphic dimension of film. The second version includes the caveat, in a footnote, that the counter side of animation's comicality is horror, and a violence which had become part of the everyday brutality of the Nazi regime. Benjamin's thesis moves closer to Adorno's pessimism about mass culture, anticipating the criticism of Disney cartoons expressed by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In the third version of the essay, references to Brecht come to replace those to Mickey Mouse and Disney. Yet in abandoning Disney, Leslie argues, 'Benjamin was rejecting something that had changed anyway', as the cartoons of the late 1930s 'became naturalistic, moralistic and tamed'.

In this account, animation is at the heart of debates and struggles over culture and politics. *Hollywood Flatlands* traces these not only through the central premise that animation's art of mutation and metamorphosis is intertwined with a politics of transformation, but, in more directly historical terms, in relation to the rise of Fascism. The chapter on 'Leni and Walt' opens with the encounter in 1938 between the Nazi propagandist film-maker Leni Riefenstahl and Walt Disney, the only Hollywood celebrity who would receive her. Disney's films had generated a good deal of debate in Germany, due in substantial part to his use of German fairy-tales. While the 'how German is it?' question was raised by critics and commentators in relation

to Disney's versions, 'it could not be denied that Disney had tapped into something dear to the Teutonic "soul" .... In this era, for Riefenstahl and for Disney, the "German feeling" was a code word for restitution. It acted to wipe out the futuristically propelled avant garde', replacing it with Kitsch. The connections multiply: Disney's Fordist methods find their parallels in the monopolistic culture industry in which Riefenstahl worked; both Riefenstahl's film *Olympia* and Disney's *Snow White* stage a battle over beauty in which Nordic classicism and 'spick and span Gothic' respectively become a denial of technological modernity. It was not until the close of 1941, when Germany declared war on America, that it also said goodbye to Disney.

Ten years before Riefenstahl's meeting with Disney in Hollywood, Sergei Eisenstein had travelled to meet him. The encounter received a brief paragraph in Ivor Montagu's *With Eisenstein in Hollywood*; Leslie weaves an entire chapter around it, which she titles 'Eisenstein Shakes Mickey's Hand in Hollywood'. During the period in which debates over the proper use of sound in film were at their height, Eisenstein found in Disney an exemplum of experimental sound, 'associating the action in Mickey Mouse', as Montagu wrote, 'with sound chosen for its arbitrary effect'. To this account, Leslie adds a discussion of Eisenstein's long-standing interest in drawing - from his childhood sketches, in which he transposed animal and human forms and characteristics, onwards. Like Benjamin, he was absorbed by, and a collector of, the images of Grandville. Eisenstein found in caricatures and cartoons a primal energy which he called 'protoplasmic', an evolutionary understanding of life forms. Animation is also animism. The correlation ties in, on the one hand, to modernist 'primitivism' and, on the other, to socialist dialectics and, in Leslie's account, to Trotsky's commitment both to 'an organic, dynamic, energy-laden vision of the development of the human race' and to an affiliation between men and animals. At the heart of animation lie fundamental questions of the identity, relationship and difference between man, animal and machine.

We can find a similar testing of boundaries in the films of Charlie Chaplin, whose 'gags' so often revolve around the drama of objects or things, and transformations of the human body, often as a form of camouflage or self-erasure. The film theorist André Bazin described this well: 'Driven into a corner by a terrible and unavoidable danger, Charlie hides behind appearances like a crab burying itself in the sand. And this is no mere metaphor. At the opening of *The Adventurer* we see the convict emerging from the sand in which he was hiding, and burying himself again when danger returns'. Victor Shklovsky wrote that 'Chaplin's movement is dotted'. The connections with the techniques of animated film are striking. Leslie notes the ways in which the cartoon character Felix the Cat, who first appeared in 1919, borrowed the gestures of Chaplin, and the imaginative play with props, though she also emphasises the differences between the cartoon world and that of Chaplin the actor, who is bound to the physical universe, ultimately unable to dissolve himself fully into the film.

Nonetheless, Disney and Chaplin are part of the same modernist world, and of the same European avant-gardist embrace of American popular culture and technology.

There are shades of opinion that the schema of *Hollywood Flatlands* tends to exclude. When Aldous Huxley, for example, celebrated the world of Felix the Cat in 1926, it was perhaps less a reaching out to avant-gardism or to popular culture than a defensive manoeuvre, a demand that film abandon adaptation, leave narrative to the writer, and stay within its own ludic sphere. Leslie for the most part leaves aside the question of literature's relationship to the cinema, including the ways in which novelists and avant-garde artists found common cause in their resistance to narrative film. It would, however, be churlish to ask for any more than this study provides, when it is already so richly researched, so alive to complexity, so imaginative in its connections, so powerfully argued, so vividly written and so beautifully produced.

Teddie and the Philosophers

David Cunningham

Brian O'Connor, *Adorno's Negative Dialectic: Philosophy and the Possibility of Critical Rationality*, Cambridge, MA and London, MIT Press, 2004, 204pp; £22.95 cloth.

In one of his famous letters to Walter Benjamin, Adorno complains of the undialectical approach that he finds apparent in the unfolding method of the *Arcades Project*. 'Only theory', he advises Benjamin, 'can break the spell: your own merciless, good, speculative theory'.[1] A lack of 'theory' is not, of course, something of which Adorno often found himself accused. Rather the reverse. Few twentieth-century writers have such a 'merciless' reputation. Yet, while Adorno's standing within both contemporary social and aesthetic theory is probably higher than it has been at any point since the 1960s, the specifically *philosophical* import of his work remains largely ignored, or at least under-represented, within the available secondary literature.

1. Theodor Adorno, 'Letters to Walter Benjamin', in Ernst Bloch et al, *Aesthetics and Politics*, London, New Left Books, 1977, p129.

At first sight, then, Brian O'Connor's new book seems perfectly placed to remedy this neglect, insisting, as it does, upon the significance of the 'purely philosophical parts' of Adorno's oeuvre. Indeed, for O'Connor, viewed from this perspective, Adorno's thought is revealed as sticking 'remarkably close to what might be considered a traditional concern of "'pure" philosophy' (ix). *Adorno's Negative Dialectic* thus develops a reading of Adorno which - deliberately marginalising both the sociological studies and the writings on music, art and literature - stresses the 'positive contribution' to be found in his pursuit of a classically 'epistemological task': the critical elaboration of a rationally articulable account of experience, which, O'Connor argues (with some qualifications), continues to be of relevance to the concerns of contemporary philosophy, as much within the 'analytical' tradition as within the so-called 'continental' one.

Like all Critical Theory, Adorno's thought was marked by its broadly Hegelian-Marxist devotion to the possibility of an alternate 'critical rationality', other to those forms of rationality sanctioned within the 'distorted reality' of social life under capitalist modernity. The principal philosophical argument to be explicated here concerns Adorno's critical treatment of modern western thought's dominant account of the subject-object relation, and thus his rejection of its 'cardinal error': the belief that 'the power of thought is sufficient to grasp the totality of the real' (4). Through this *negative* articulation of 'the way things ought to be', Adorno elaborates his central philosophical claim that the only possible coherent account of the structure of experience entails a recognition of the *reciprocal*

and *transformative* relations of subject and object; a recognition which, he argued, remained ultimately lacking in each of Critical Theory's main theoretical competitors, from Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology to Neo-Kantianism and Logical Positivism. O'Connor does a fine job of reconstructing Adorno's criticisms here, while returning, each time, to their central underlying point: the *essential* role of mediation in all experience. This is a radically dialectical argument, insofar as mediation is understood not as a process of 'connecting two separate independently meaningful moments', but as 'constitutive of subject and object' as such (48). While Adorno, therefore, refers polemically to 'the priority of the object' - marking a recognition of the necessary non-identical moment in experience by virtue of the irreducibility of objects to concepts - in truth, object and subject each reciprocally 'requires the other in order to be thought at all' (48).

In its exposition of Adorno's 'epistemological task', this book covers, then, some fairly familiar ground, but it does so in an unusually detailed and analytical fashion. What gives weight to O'Connor's exegesis is its painstaking - and, one would have to say, at times rather laborious and repetitive - attempts to give more rigorous philosophical definitions to the key concepts deployed in Adorno's writings, in particular 'mediation' and 'nonidentity'. And while *Adorno's Negative Dialectic* is a pretty dry read - deliberately so, one suspects - it is certainly both lucid and persuasive. This is most apparent in the complex relations that O'Connor establishes, in the main part of the book, between Adorno's work and that of Kant and Hegel, lending his analyses an obvious philosophical grounding. Focusing on such relations is evidently justifiable to the extent that Adorno consistently situated his own project through his engagement with these canonical figures. Moreover, aspects of O'Connor's analyses are genuinely novel. For example, the argument that Kant's theoretical treatment of antinomies is actually more influential on Adorno's thinking than Hegel's speculative dialectic is one which I, at least, find both original and compelling.

This is O'Connor's strong point. Yet, even given the justifications for this rather conventionally restricted focus, it also indicates the book's limitations. For there is surely something dubious about a study of Adorno's philosophy that never even *mentions* the likes of Freud, Weber or Simmel. At times such exclusions are deeply problematic: some of the confusion O'Connor seems to display regarding the link Adorno makes between conceptualisation and identification might, for example, have been dispelled had he traced its roots in Nietzsche (as much as in Hegel) (17-18). Similarly, given the key debt that Adorno acknowledges, in a range of works, to psychoanalysis - admittedly not always the happiest of influences on his thought - there is something bizarre about a section which claims to read him in the context of questions in the 'philosophy of mind' without once referring to Freud (92). The same kind of peculiar omissions are also apparent in relation to Adorno's closest contemporary associates: Marcuse gets one mention in the index; extraordinarily, neither Horkheimer nor Bloch nor Benjamin get *any*. (This

despite the - I would have thought obvious - fact that so much of Adorno's work, from the early essay 'The Idea of Natural History' onwards, can be read as an effective commentary on aspects of Benjamin's fragmentary philosophy).

The reasons for such omissions, and for what stands in their stead (rather than Freud we get six pages on Nagel and Searle, while Strawson gets a more extended treatment than Marx) are, I think, complicated, and have much to do with the very conception of philosophy with which O'Connor works. It should be said, too, that there is, no doubt, something refreshing about a book which is less interested in Adorno's convergences with Derrida or Foucault than in how certain of his arguments might be related to Frege's delineation of the elements of the proposition (181). Yet, such novelty notwithstanding, there is also, shall we say, a certain whiff of desperation for a particular kind of philosophical *respectability* apparent in all this - one which demands that all those weird arty types that Adorno was so fond of get edited out of the story. (The reader dependent upon this book would, for instance, have no idea of the profound impact of Schoenberg upon Adorno's thought, not only on the aesthetic theory but also on its 'purely philosophical parts'). At the same time, the nature of O'Connor's insistence upon Adorno's significance as a *philosopher* - despite its undoubted exegetical merits - suggests grounds for some fairly serious misgivings as regards this book's overall project and its general claims.

Perhaps most important among these would be the book's key assertion that Adorno is best read as doing what O'Connor unhesitatingly describes as *transcendental* philosophy. The rationale for this, perhaps, is fairly uncontentious: Adorno is concerned with the conditions of possibility of experience *per se*; *ipso facto* he makes an implicitly transcendental claim for 'a notion of experience that *exclusively* is consistent with the rational expression of philosophy' (3). Yet there are good reasons why Adorno himself never defined his own thought in these terms. In one of his responses to criticisms of *Specters of Marx*, Derrida notes, *a propos* of Negri, that the word 'ontological' never appears in Marx, and that 'one should perhaps not be too quick to reinsert it in his text'.[2] Much the same could be said as regards the 'transcendental' in Adorno. At the very least one needs to consider, as O'Connor does not, *why* Adorno resisted such a characterisation.

Such resistance also tells us something about the status of 'philosophy', more generally, in Adorno's writings, to the extent that 'philosophy's historical fate' is itself frequently thematised there. Echoing Marx's famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, and its unfulfilled promise of the *actualisation* of the alienated universality of philosophical rationality, *Negative Dialectics* famously begins: 'Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realise it was missed'.[3] All of Adorno's contributions to the 'traditional concern[s] of "pure" philosophy' must be read with this in mind. O'Connor recognises this (sort of), but its significance for the relationship between philosophy and Critical Theory - a central concern of two famous essays from 1937 by Horkheimer and Marcuse - is consistently marginalised. For Adorno, as for Horkheimer and Marcuse, a critique that wills emancipation has also

2. Jacques Derrida, 'Marx & Sons', in Michael Sprinker (ed.), *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's* Specters of Marx, London and New York, Verso, 1999, pp257-8.

3. Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, E.B. Ashton (trans), London, Routledge, 1973, p3.

to involve a reflection upon the conditions of knowledge entailed by the contradictions present within existing *social* reality - contradictions which require, therefore, more than merely *philosophical* resolution, or, indeed, analysis, insofar as philosophy itself is rooted in a division of labour which derives from these contradictions. The extent to which this conception of theory colours *all* of Adorno's work must bring seriously into question, even given the caveats that O'Connor dutifully inserts, his intention to 'consider Adorno's negative dialectic in isolation from the sociological specifics of his critical theory', as a way of identifying its 'purely philosophical justifications' (x-xi). The philosophy cannot simply be severed from the social theory without misrepresenting the arguments that are, precisely, the most philosophical in Adorno's works. No account of his philosophy should forget its attention to what Marcuse described as the 'untruth' always inherent in 'transcendental philosophy' as such. True, O'Connor notes that the 'largely abstract' concerns of the philosophical texts upon which he focuses are, nonetheless, always written in view of an 'authentic concretion', serving as a 'theoretical foundation of the sort of reflexivity - the critical stance - required by critical theory' (ix). Yet, if this is something different from a classical transcendentalism (and it is), then the broader *interdisciplinary* and *collaborative* nature of Critical Theory's project - and the *re-inscription* of the transcendental-empirical opposition itself that it entails - needs to be much more forcefully recognised than it is in O'Connor's account. That it is not may well have something to do with what is happening, institutionally, to philosophy within the academy right now. With the (endlessly re-iterated) waning of 'Theory', and *its* (at least speculative) transdisciplinary promise, the reassertion of a classical, if slightly expanded, disciplinary identity is on the agenda again. If, as Adorno once wrote, 'no theory today escapes the marketplace', the marketplace here has less to do with the pure commercial logic of sales than with the internal marketplace of academia in a situation governed by the imperatives of the Research Assessment Exercise and the like. This has been accompanied by a certain amount of to-and-fro across established continental and analytical divides - the former referencing Bernard Williams or Donald Davidson; the latter finally acknowledging there might be something of interest in that Hegel chap after all. Clearly this is not an entirely unwelcome development, yet, too often, it is underpinned by fundamentally conservative and depoliticising tendencies. Adorno and the likes of Wilfred Sellars cannot simply be put alongside each other as if they operated within some straightforward continuum of shared problems and conceptions of the 'philosophical' itself.

In this regard, too, it is more than a petty gripe to observe the extent to which O'Connor lacks any feeling for Adorno's *style*, and its inseparability from his philosophical content (something which, for example, Gillian Rose captured so well in *The Melancholy Science*). For, lacking an account of the dialectical fabric of Adorno's texts, O'Connor finds logical 'inconsistency' when it isn't really there. Adorno seems at one point to assert the primacy of the social, at another to launch a devastating assault on all 'sociologism' (136); at one point

to defend Kant's notion of the thing-in-itself as a recognition of the 'nonidentical', and at another to criticise it (61-2). Yet, surely what O'Connor worries about as inconsistency just is the textual movement of negative dialectics.

That *Adorno's Negative Dialectic* is dominated by a strange apologetic tone would seem, in part, to be a function of this perplexity and of a concomitant strategy of justification. Adorno's readings of Kant are legitimised as anticipating 'the famous criticisms of Strawson' (121), while, for example - summarising Adorno's attack on logical philosophy - O'Connor appends a typically conciliatory parenthesis: 'This is, no doubt, a rather quaint view of the business of logic' (58). Why, exactly, we are not told. Elsewhere, Adorno's 'mining' of the works of German Idealism is, O'Connor assures us, also 'fashioned in ways that would have been the cause of grievous consternation to Kant and Hegel' (172). No doubt. But, then, one would hope so! (After all, in part, Adorno's claims for the 'potentially revolutionary resources' to be found in what O'Connor calls 'idealistic looking concepts' has to do with what he takes to be their historically-conditioned homology with the actual idealism of capitalist form). This odd litany of apologies leads up to an extraordinary (if, by this point, not entirely unexpected) concession - so extraordinary I quote it at some length - in the concluding pages of the book:

> Undoubtedly the history of philosophy will find in Habermas's writings a significantly more comprehensive and sophisticated version of critical theory … The line of thought I emphasise in Adorno - his epistemological strategy - certainly provides only a limited contribution to the complex and detailed questions raised by the second generation of critical theory - it is, after all quite abstract in its procedure (169-70).

Leaving aside the question of what this says about O'Connor's reasons for writing this book in the first place, and how exactly the 'abstract' is to be *philosophically* understood here, I think that there is considerable doubt that the history of philosophy will come to anything like this conclusion. Indeed, it is a mark of much *third* generation Critical Theory of the last decade or so - not least in the English-speaking world - that it precisely starts from a move back to Adorno and away from Habermas's neo-Kantian, and fundamentally undialectical, project. Intended as a 'contemporary' defence of the coherency of Adorno's philosophical position, against Habermas's charge that it is limited by an obsolescent theory of consciousness, the failure to acknowledge the degree to which such a charge has been countered by a range of other commentators - some of whom even describe themselves as philosophers - risks making O'Connor's book itself look somewhat obsolescent.

Despite my misgivings, that would be something of a shame, because, in its restricted way, there is much that is genuinely innovative here, and, at the very least, it raises some compelling questions. Whether it redeems Adorno for the contemporary discipline of philosophy is however more doubtful. More to the point, would it be such a good thing if it did?

Disruption and Flickering in the Weimar Republic

Janelle Blankenship

Frances Guerin, *A Culture of Light: Cinema and Technology in 1920s Germany*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2005, 360pp; US$74.95 hardback, US$24.95 paperback.

Daguerre in the 1820s referred to the invention of photographic art as 'sun painting'. From his photography to the dawn-to-dusk daylight effect of Daguerre's diorama and beyond, sun-inspired light has served a double purpose: to both expose and manipulate reality, ultimately, our vision of time and space. Frances Guerin's study focuses on 1920s Germany, certainly a period of heightened experimentation in the arena of lighting and 'living pictures'. Although the earliest cinematographers were forced to film outdoors in the atelier of the sun, technically manipulated light sources opened up new possibilities for indoor studios in the early 1910s. Guerin explains that German directors had a somewhat belated introduction to the 'culture of light' that revolutionised filmmaking. Even after 1908, when the first 'quicksilver lamps' were used by Oskar Messter, German directors often used daylight or petroleum and gas as the only available artificial means of lighting in the cinema. Yet, according to Guerin, several years after the First World War the disquieting effect of technological modernity punctured the modern spectacle of German film, in the form of the brilliance and intensity of electric light, a cinematic commodity imported from American and European studios. Although German filmmakers did not develop the lighting strategies and setups, Guerin makes the compelling claim that they interiorised the theme of electric energy, using it as compositional material, an agent and bearer of 'discursive meaning'.

As exemplified also in the 1920s art of light as avant-garde medium, the interaction of glass and light forged new conceptions of the public and the private in Weimar Germany; in residential buildings and in aesthetic theory alike the formations 'inside' and 'outside' became integrated. Interwar German artists, architects and media theorists contemplated how light transformed human perception and vision: Bruno Taut, Paul Scheerbarth, László Moholy-Nagy had a utopic vision of light as a new space of mobility and sheer transparency, one that dissolved the tension in our fractured and alienating social landscape. Yet the reformulation of space through light in interwar German cinema does not first and foremost speak of a cohabitation or togetherness of technology and the human. Rather, it often highlights

an invasion or intrusion of the public onto the private sphere. As Guerin importantly explains in her treatise, the heterosexual 'happy end' to many of the German films born of a 'culture of light' is an artificial escape from the 'harshness of modernity through a retreat to a morally conservative' nostalgia, feigning at best a resolution of an ideal social harmony. Light is a melodramatic force in films such as *Varieté* (1925) and *Sylvester* (1923), but in a narrative built on disruption and flickering, it is precisely the force and weight of this 'melodrama' that is put in question. As Guerin asks with *Varieté,* does the light spectacle mirror or hinder the moral resolution of the artificial 'happy end'?

In the most extreme version of this melodrama of a new medium, *Jenseits der Straße* (1929), 'light' only highlights oppressive, unrelenting gloom: here there is no alternative to the vice, immorality and 'illogic' of the city. As an alien power, the sources of the street lighting are invisible. Even the elaborate sign of the 'Electric Bar', the neon night-time semiotic, according to Guerin, is an enigma that appears entirely separate from the building to which it should be attached. Here we are reminded of a moment in Siegfried Kracauer's famous study, *From Caligari to Hitler,* when he lingers briefly on the glowing eyes of an optician's shop, an illuminated pair of spectacles that follow the protagonist of Karl Grune's *Die Straße* (1923), writing that 'for the first time, on the German screen window dressings participate in the action'. Guerin is also interested in capturing such magical moments of a haunted *mise-en-scène* of modernity, and it is not insignificant that this image of the optician eyes that Kracauer describes is used as a cover illustration for Guerin's text. After all, lighting can be used to 'lie', as a 1920s article in *Filmtechnik* explains - to shift our understanding of time and space, of public and private spheres. In *Die Straße,* the euphoric notion of the street as home, a popular theme of *flânerie* literature (Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis praise this inversion of the public-private in their essay on Naples) is overturned. The street we now encounter is a horror of haunting and alienation. During the 1920s, when the number of electrically lit streetlights nearly doubled in Germany, electrical light was used as a primary vehicle in German cinema to represent the abrasions and interruptions of technological modernity. It bespoke the alienation of the metropolis, and the fear that the public and private spheres were corroded. Guerin's study, which highlights this exterior-interior drama, thus intersects nicely with Miriam Hansen's work on moral reform and the 'light play' [*Lichtspiel*] as a presumed threat to patriarchal division of public and private.

Another fascinating subject of Guerin's gaze is a little-known film of the 1920s avant-garde, Arthur Robison's *Warning Shadows* or *Schatten* (1923). Its German version also bore the subtitle 'A Nocturnal Hallucination', 'Eine nächtliche Halluczination'. In this film, it is not the nocturnal street scene that is presented as spectacle, but an interior night-time labyrinth that unfolds as primary attraction. An itinerant magic lantern showman 'projects' hidden desires of guests at an aristocratic dinner party (the company of a

count). The plot is love and intrigue, a play within a play; guests are hypnotised and their shadows set free. The subconscious of the characters act out their passions, an affair and murder, a horrifying public spectacle. In keeping with the magic lantern pre-cinematic reference, we are only presented with shadows: even the light of the lantern is implied, more or less imaginary. The light and darkness of this shadow art indicate not a metropolis-fed mania or neurosis, and the hypnotism is strikingly different from the omnipresent observation of the illuminated eyes of the optician shop. Rather, the shadow play here points to a cure, light therapy or psychoanalysis, as Kracauer states, and as the Marxist author Peter Weiss also asserts in his 1956 book *Avantgarde Film*.

Schatten is the one film of Guerin's text that takes us far beyond the reified capitalist spectacle and deep into an interior drama of the psyche; it too has a clichéd, moralistic ending. Yet Guerin's analysis of *Schatten* skirts this issue of psychoanalysis and desire, focusing instead on the uncertainty of the framing event of this 'film within a film'. As a result, she does not discuss the end of the film, when a new day with sober, natural lighting, symbolising the light of reason, spills into the scene. Instead she focuses on the 'shadow play' as an 'openness', a cause of confusion and uncertainty for the spectator. She even writes that 'contemporary audiences were nevertheless arrested by the confusion of this new medium and its proximity to reality, because, despite its confusion, it was preferable to the tedium and insubstantiality of daily life'. Overlooking the psychoanalytic aspect and the German subtitle of this film (which is nowhere quoted in her study), Guerin concludes that spectators of *Shadows* read the story as a straightforward narrative, and as a result find it difficult to differentiate between the main plot and the framing story embedded as a magic lantern 'film within the film'. Certainly there are multiple versions of these early films now available in archives, and it is highly possible that Guerin based her analysis on a different print. Yet it is still worth noting that, precisely at the moment when light and shadow could point to a cinematic language of affect and desire, Guerin initially hesitates, although elsewhere her analysis cogently highlights what such a terrain might look like. This is most provocative and promising when she speaks of lighting as an emotional 'excess', above all as it is articulated in a First World War documentary *Das Stahlwerk der Poldihütte* (1917), where utopian aspirations are perfectly situated in the brilliance of steel. The soft light that would typically showcase a film star here showcases mechanised, manufactured creation. Bathed in soft light, steel is given the space and face of a human protagonist, whereas human figures are banished to a visual and conceptual background.

This celebratory mode of light reminds us that light and lighting in these twenties films are not only replications of the alienation of modernity. They can also serve as an 'attraction', displaying a new technological vision and a stunning focus on exhibition that was dominant during the earliest years of 'living pictures'. When discussing the harmony and joy of the rustic

sepia colour in Richard Eichberg's little-known *Das Bacchanal des Todes* (1917), Guerin celebrates the ceremonial use of colour, demonstrating how it was used along with lighting in early cinema to create a new cinematic code for affect, enhancing intense emotions. In her discussion of early German detective film, such as Franz Hofer's *Der Steckbrief* (1913), Guerin also celebrates an electricity (here an electrically operated cable car) that is used to playfully frame emotional tension. The dramatic social drama of 1914 that Guerin also analyses, *Und das Licht erlosch* (1914), again is a powerful tale of light as pulsating passion, a lighthouse beam that creates a sense of urgency and anxiety, but also underlines the 'intense emotions' and romantic passions of the characters.

As these dates illustrate, Guerin does not limit herself to Weimar film. She provocatively uses her theme to move backwards and forwards in film history. From tinting and the image of magic lantern technology, to electricity as a corrupt, Faustian pact or design of the devil (*Algol*, 1920), to the spotlights and searchlights of Nazi Germany, she weaves a fine web for a powerful narrative of *mise-en-scène* and modernity. Simultaneously, she examines films that celebrate and criticise technological change. Paradigmatic of this is another early twenties film that is caught between two worlds: the power of early modern myths and the power of the machine. In Guerin's reading, *Der Golem* (1920) marries the spectacular technologies of cinema to the centuries-old rituals of the Cabala in an ambiguous take on the image and modernisation. Light is a brilliant spectacle and sign, an openness that bespeaks the future - but it could also be interpreted as a crippling force in the narrative. She concludes that *Der Golem* encourages a critical audience reception, as it perpetually oscillates between myth and modernity. Light is here a compositional element, but also a means for cultural transformation. When analysing *Faust* (1926), Guerin notes that lighting technology is part of a larger discourse on the transformation of time and space, in particular human-centred time and history. *Faust* highlights a technologically modern world that is marked both by instantaneity and its other, the slow dissolve. A star metamorphoses into the word 'love' in a prolonged moment of filmic desire; elsewhere in *Faust*, the *mise-en-scène* is interrupted by frenzied flashes of broken light. Guerin's study gives us a valuable technical language to examine the pioneering work behind such editing techniques of superimposition and dissolve (here the trick is Carl Hofmann's 'Two-Sun-Phenomenon').

Perhaps as a result of her intense focus on lighting as a primary phenomenon of the 1920s, at times Guerin tends to dismiss the earliest years of cinema and the pre-cinema period that was so important for film's development. Without any sources or information to back up such a claim, she actually states in her text that 'the development of the pre-First World War German film aesthetic was retarded by relatively unsophisticated technologies' (49). The idea that a German film aesthetic in its early years was 'retarded', when German directors and technicians did pioneering work

in slow motion, time lapse, and so on, goes completely against the grain of current film scholarship, which undoes the narrative of the early years as 'primitive'. The danger is that one extrapolates from Guerin's study to conclude that Germany always had a belated introduction to new 'cinematic' technologies. Nothing could be further from the truth. *Schatten* tells us, for example, that it was not cinema alone that inaugurated fantastic journeys through time and space, the interior of the mind as well as the exotic of the exterior. Microscopes, magic lanterns, and dioramas/panoramas were used for centuries in the grand German tradition of optics for the purpose of life science pedagogy and playful 'projected' entertainment/edutainment. In fact, as early as the 1890s there were German magic lantern shows that thematised the introduction of electric light to the hectic metropolis, a spectacle that was presented as both dangerous and edifying. Certainly it is worth mentioning that Weimar film was not the first or final flirtation with a new culture of electricity, as Carolyn Marvin elucidates in her study, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (1988).

That said, Guerin's book is an absolute first in the field. Even if Guerin fails to trace her 'culture of light' back to other 'light' moments of modernity that are now popular in early cinema scholarship - such as Loïe Fuller's light-display serpentine dances, turn-of-the-century 'ladies of electricity', the electrical scenes of the colonial expositions, or Röntgen's wondrous 'new light' (X ray) - her amazing use of archival sources and technical sources tells us that there is much, much more to the German cinema of the teens and twenties than we had previously imagined. *A Culture of Light* is a dazzling study that puts old films on the map in an entirely original and innovative way.

Resistance Incarnate: on Rancière

Peter Sjølyst-Jackson

Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Gabriel Rockhill (trans), London and New York, Continuum, 2004, 116pp; £14.99 hardback. Jacques Rancière, *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*, Charlotte Mandell (trans), Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2004; 169pp; US$19.95 paperback, US$50.00 hardback.

The Politics of Aesthetics situates Jacques Rancière's oeuvre in relation to his break with 'structuralist Marxism'. The translator, Gabriel Rockhill, records in a brief overview of his career that Rancière was closely affiliated to Althusser's circle as a contributor to the collective volume *Reading 'Capital'* in 1965, but that he distanced himself from this 'philosophy of order' in the wake of 1968, because it 'anaesthetized the revolt against the bourgeoisie' (*PA* 1). In an afterword to the volume, Slavoj Zizek replays the moment with comical gusto, evoking how it didn't take long for 'Rancière's unique voice to explode in a thunder which rocked the Althusserian scene' (*PA* 69). Such, perhaps, is the narrow frame through which Rancière has come to be recognised, or ignored, in the world of Anglo-American criticism. So why read him now? In 'our time of the disorientation of the Left', Zizek contends, Rancière 'offers one of the few consistent conceptualisations of *how we are to continue to resist*' (*PA* 79).

What these two new books resist most stridently are the habits of compartmentalisation in literary and cultural studies, which, according to Rancière, endlessly trace ruptures between the old and the new, from realist representation to modernist anti-representation, from progressive modernity to postmodern disenchantment. Demonstrating a formidable knowledge of European intellectual and cultural history, *The Politics of Aesthetics* ranges across philosophy, literature, painting, photography, film and music. Originally published as a series of responses to questions from Muriel Combes and Bernard Aspe, the translator supplies this English edition with an interview with the author, an illuminating glossary of conceptual terms, and a bibliography of primary and secondary sources in French and English. The style is dense and programmatic, but this gives way, in *The Flesh of Words*, to lucid analyses of the 'work of incarnation' in literature and philosophy. Rancière traces here 'the power by which words are set in motion and become deeds' in poems by Wordsworth, Byron, Mandelstam and Rimbaud; the figure of 'the word made flesh' in different interpretations of the Gospels by Erich Auerbach, Frank Kermode and St Augustine; the 'theologies of the novel' in Cervantes, Balzac and Proust; and finally, the problematic of writing and incarnation in Althusser and Deleuze. Throughout the readings, commentaries and programmatic

statements in both books, Rancière attempts to elucidate the manifold conditions under which art and literature circumscribe the possibilities for change, through their diversion and alteration of sensible perceptions, inscribing themselves on the landscape, the flesh, and into the very rhythms and movements of bodies. In *The Flesh of Words* this is shown to involve a democratic malady that is peculiar to literature. As textual matter, literature cannot embody its incarnation, and remains 'separate' from its inscriptions on the social body. But this provokes a paradoxical response in literary and philosophical texts, which attempt to 'escape the fate of the letter released into the world' by inscribing the body of their incarnation within themselves - as though their 'deeds' could be programmed in advance. It is a self-defeating struggle, says Rancière, because literature 'lives only by evading the incarnation that it incessantly puts into play'. And yet, he affirms that this struggle 'must always be begun anew' (*FW* 4-6).

The Politics of Aesthetics attacks notions of 'artistic modernity' that separate the 'aesthetic' sphere of art from the industrial world of labour. Rancière rejects this 'lazy and absurd schema' with contempt, and lampoons the 'vain debates' that worry about whether the arts are politically submissive or artistically autonomous. Although there are specific interventions on Benjamin's notion of mechanical reproduction and Lyotard's elaboration of the sublime, Rancière's targets of criticism seem to be many and diffuse. This lack of specific reference doesn't serve his argument well, especially when transplanted into the Anglophone context, whereupon the number of potential targets is vastly increased. Nonetheless, it is a restrictive conception of 'aesthetics' he rejects, one that would 'consign art to its effects on sensibility' or, alternatively, link 'the conquests of artistic innovation to the victories of emancipation' (*PA* 10). Both of these prevent a clear understanding of the relationships between art and collective experience, obscuring 'the struggles of the proletariat to bring labour out of the night surrounding it, out of its exclusion from shared visibility and speech' (*PA* 45).

Rancière's starting point for a different elaboration of aesthetics relates, precisely, to this field of 'shared visibility and speech'. 'Aesthetics' is a historically mediated 'distribution of the sensible' which, in its 'primary' definition, refers to 'the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to experience' (*PA* 13). In opposition to any theory of sensible affects, Rancière's project is to 're-establish' the conditions of intelligibility proper to aesthetics as 'a specific regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts' (*PA* 10). In order to explore the implications of this 'aesthetic regime of art', he contrasts it to the 'ethical regime of images' established in the formulations of Plato, and the 'representative regime of art' founded by Aristotle. In the ethical regime, there is no distinction between art and politics, since, for Plato, there are only 'ways of doing and making', divided between knowledge based 'arts' with 'precise ends', and their devious counterparts: the 'simulacra that imitate simple appearances' (*PA* 21). While this confines reflection upon all 'arts' to questions of truth, purpose and end results, the representative regime of art, ushered in by Aristotle, will isolate 'imitation' as a separate branch of the arts, to be judged

on different criteria. Here, the simulacra of painting, poems and the stage are legitimised according to a twofold *division of labour*. The 'ways of doing and making' are categorised into restricted occupations, while the artistic products themselves are judged according to fixed norms of evaluation. Included in these norms are 'the privilege accorded to tragic action' and 'the hierarchy of genres according to the dignity of their subject matter'. The practices and products of art would thus enter into 'a relationship of global analogy with an overall hierarchy of political and social occupations' (*PA* 22). The obligation to produce a 'distribution of the sensible' in line with social hierarchy - 'tragedy for heroes and nobles, comedy for the people of meagre means' - comes to an end as art bestows honour on the commonplace and confers visibility on 'anonymous individuals' by turning them into acceptable subjects of art. The 'aesthetic revolution', says Rancière, was first carried forth in nineteenth-century literature, as 'an epoch and a society were deciphered through the features, clothes, or gestures of an ordinary individual (Balzac); the sewer revealed a civilization (Hugo); the daughter of a farmer and the daughter of a banker were caught in the equal force of style as an 'absolute manner of seeing things (Flaubert)', (*PA* 32).

A brief sketch like this invites hasty dismissal: Isn't this simply a re-compartmentalisation of 'beginnings' and 'ends', substituting a relatively even chronology for a bizarrely lopsided one, jumping from Ancient Greece to nineteenth century Europe? This dismissal, however, would ignore Rancière's frequent reminders that the three regimes are not mutually exclusive, that the new does not abolish the old, and that, at 'any given point in time, several regimes coexist and intermingle' (*PA* 50). Art is still identifiable by reference to ethics, truth and intention - often as a means to oppose dominant systems of representation. As evidenced in Terry Eagleton's celebration of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, for instance, it is still possible to make a virtue of singling out novelistic realism 'as the morally and artistically serious representation of unvarnished everyday life, as the common people enter the literary arena long before they make their collective appearance on the political stage'.[1] When Rancière recasts this frequently observed shift in terms of the 'aesthetic revolution', however, it is not simply to affirm what Eagleton evokes as the irresistible rise of the proletariat, from literary representation to political materialisation. Of more crucial importance, for Rancière, are the *uncertain* possibilities of political subjectivity in the wake of this 'silent revolution', which entails new preconditions for recognising art - that is to say, in relation to politics. No longer grasped along the Platonic or Aristotelian lines of 'division within ways of doing and making', artistic products are now ascribed a 'sensible mode of being' (*PA* 26). Severed from its previous contexts of identification, the 'autonomous' art work is now liable to be interpreted against the stated intentions of artists. It is 'inhabited by a heterogeneous power, the power of a form of thought that has become foreign to itself' (*PA* 22). This has complex implications for political subjectivity, some of which can be discerned in Rancière's distinction between the 'two major variants' of modernist discourse. The first, 'purist formalism',

1. Terry Eagleton, 'Pork Chops and Pineapples', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 25, No. 20, October 2003, p23.

rejects the cultural uses of representation (in painting), communication (in literature) and emotive expression (in music), and sees in modern art the recovery of its proper autonomy, internal to its distinctive forms. If hybrid postmodernism has marked a decisive break from this, Rancière holds, it has done so by disavowing the second major form of the modernist paradigm: 'modernatism'. This strange term is presumably intended to evoke a point of convergence between social projects of 'modernity' and artistic endeavours of 'modernism'. Its trajectory, according to Rancière, passes from Schiller's 'aesthetic state', through the 'aesthetic programme' of Hegel, Hölderlin, Schelling and German Romanticism, to the Marxist revolution of producers and artisans. In contrast to purist formalism, which seems to *exclude* the social in its pursuit of artistic autonomy, the paradigm of 'modernatism' identifies new and radical possibilities of the social *within* the autonomy of art. Calling for a 'total revolution' of the sensible, it seeks in art 'the material realization of a humanity still only existing as an idea' (*PA* 26-7). To recall a formulation from *The Flesh of Words*, such art 'gives itself the body of its incarnation', as though it could programme its deeds within itself, prior to its circulation in the social world (*FW* 4).

To combat any hasty claims that the revolutionary arts must always adhere to a totalitarian logic, Rancière draws a distinction between different ideas of the 'avant-garde' which, he says, proceed from two different political subjectivities: 'archi-politics' and 'meta-politics'. In the archi-political version, the avant-garde operates as an advanced detachment, issuing the rules for historical interpretation and social action. It imposes, in Rancière's terms, a 'police order', a homogenous social space premised on the rigid exclusion of the fractured process of 'politics' as such. The meta-political avant-garde, by contrast, radicalises political disruption, using art as a model for 'a total life programme'. Deploying, after Schiller, an aesthetic of anticipation, it invents new sensible forms and material structures for a life to come (*PA* 29-30). As a utopian form of socialism, however, it runs up against a paradox; the utopia it anticipates is identical to the homogenous social space of archi-politics. And yet, it is the same utopian impulse that generates artistic resistance to 'the obvious sensible facts in which the normality of domination is rooted' (*PA* 40). As such, its politics are ambivalent, anticipating a utopia that is both a place of closure, and a radical opening.

Rancière's fascination is with the openings made possible in art and literature. Their 'fictions', he says, are '*material* rearrangements of signs and images' that can spread 'lines of fracture and disincorporation'. As such, they do not produce 'an organism or a communal body', but rather, contribute to the formation of 'uncertain communities', 'unspecified groups of people', 'enunciative collectives that call into question the distribution of roles, territories, and languages' (*PA* 39-40). The democratic disorder of literature which Rancière calls 'literarity' resonates strongly with Derrida's elaboration of 'dissemination' as the unending possibilities of digression, divergence, accident and fragmentation. Rancière does not acknowledge this resonance, but it is particularly evident in his frequent recourse to Plato's *Phaedrus*, which, he says, 'for more than two millennia has regulated thought about writing in the West' (*FW* 102). If, for Derrida, Plato's

denunciation of writing involves a risk of dissemination that remains unthinkable for philosophy, in *The Flesh of Words* Rancière restricts the focus to writing as 'an imbalance of the legitimate order of discourse, of the way it is distributed and at the same time distributes bodies in an ordered community' (*FW* 103). Rancière traces this notion of writing through Balzac's novel *The Village Priest*, which he considers an 'exemplary fable of democracy', despite the fact that it was written for conservative moral edification in an age of post-revolutionary emancipation. More surely than the modern perfection of plotting in Sterne, James, Poe or Borges, this 'badly designed' novel highlights the paradox of writing, strung between literarity and incarnation. The story of Véronique, torn from her proper destination in manual labour or housekeeping - thanks to her reading a book full of dreams of the tropics and chaste loves - reflects the obsession of the age: the 'misfortune' of *déclassement*, of 'working-class bodies torn from their natural goals by the course of the letter and thrown by it into ways of wandering and misery, suicide and crime' (*FW* 98-105). Véronique's fateful encounter with the book, says Rancière, recalls the testimonies of autodidacts in the nineteenth century, where the encounter with a book makes a new world possible, by unmaking an older one. Balzac's novel is thus obliged to remedy this 'disorder of writing' through the figure of the Catholic priest, 'an engineer of souls in the Saint-Simonian manner', who guides Véronique in her renunciation of books. As Rancière shows, this entails the substitution of one form of writing for another, a renunciation of literature and the adoption of a form of writing incarnate in the landscape and in the social body. This writing 'inscribed in the texture of things' would be the healthy, ordered and yielding work of irrigating the soil. As Balzac's Véronique testifies: 'I have marked … my repentance in indelible lines on this earth. It is written in the fertilized fields, in the enlarged mountain town, in the streams directed from the mountain to this plain, which had previously been uncultivated and wild, but is now green and productive' (*FW* 107). Balzac attempts, in other words, to give his novel the body of its incarnation, in a paradoxical attempt to write his way out of the democratic disorder of literature. The great difficulties he had in finishing the novel, Rancière makes clear, occurred only after its initial serialisation in *La Presse* in 1839. Despite his reactionary conservatism, the irony is that Balzac was always writing 'for those men and women who *should not* read' (*FW* 108-9).

It is at such moments that Rancière's work undermines the standard criticism that his work offers nothing much beyond a backward looking fervour, and a romantic attachment to nineteenth century rebellion.[2] In Rancière's defence, Zizek points to the proliferation of creative protest, and the subversive potential of body-piercing, cross-dressing, absurdist 'flash mobs' and cyberspace. In relation to the internet, however, we should also observe the more obvious fact that it is *writing* that survives, indeed disseminates, more unpredictably than ever. The tensions, contradictions and aporias of democratic disorder, and of the utopias that try to order them - traced by Rancière through the histories of philosophy, art and literature - have not gone away. They remain in the uncertain communities, where people read things they shouldn't.

2. See for instance the reviews of Rancière's *The Politics of Aesthetics* and *The Philosopher and His Poor* by Stewart Martin and Mark Neocleous respectively, in *Radical Philosophy* 131, May/June 2005, pp39-46.