

# BLACK MEN OF THE WORLD UNITE!

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*Nadia Ellis*

Michelle Ann Stephens, *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914-1962*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2005, pp366; £15.95 paperback.

Michelle Ann Stephens' impressive new book *Black Empire* brought to mind a letter C.L.R. James wrote late in his life. It is the one cited in Kent Worcester's biography where James ruminates abstractedly on how a political man, himself included, often expects a woman to be there 'for his own convenience and his own affairs'.<sup>1</sup> James writes: 'I was not crude or conscious that I was maltreating them [women] in any way, but simply that is the view that men have and work on instinctively ...' James may have been reflecting on his collaborations with women (Constance Webb and Selma Weinstein, whom he married, or Raya Dunayevskaya and Grace Lee in the Johnson-Forest Tendency), but the contorted grammar of the passage also suggests a more wide-ranging critique. James is admitting to a political blind spot that he thinks other male comrades shared.

*Black Empire* brought this letter to mind not because Stephens takes James and others to task for their gender politics. Rather, her disinclination to upbraid allows her to make interesting formulations out of the stuff of James' admission. In Stephens we have a writer bold enough to name the Caribbean pan-Africanist movement 'a masculine global imaginary'. Having got that out of the way in the book's subtitle, Stephens can move to the ideas that branch out from these roots. The rich, exciting, and rigorously researched book that follows argues that Caribbean-born 'black transnationalist[s]' (p14) - Marcus Garvey, Claude McKay, and C.L.R. James in particular - envisioned radical possibilities for black global citizenship that had quite meaningful gender content. From a potent mixture of radical politics (especially Marxism), mobile identities, and gender, Stephens crafts weighty observations on narratives of black diaspora.

The book's title refers to the grand visions for black sovereignty and world citizenship we get in texts by figures as diverse as the three just mentioned, as well others such as Cyril Valentine Briggs, Martin R. Delany, George Schuyler, and W.E.B. DuBois. These writers contributed to the great variety of narratives from the Reconstruction era onwards which tried to imagine possibilities for revolutionary, 'internationalist', black states (p38). By yoking blackness with empire, Stephens notes that these men conceived 'a cultural politics constituted by both radical and reactionary impulses' (p38). The priority on masculinity is evident both in these movements' radical and reactionary aspects. For instance, Stephens ultimately agrees with Paul Gilroy

1. Quoted in Kent Worcester, *C.L.R. James: A Political Biography*, Albany, SUNY Press, 1996, p102. Ellipses in original.

that Garvey's appropriation of imperial aesthetics were 'fascistic' (p100). But she also sees his spectacles as parodic, and therefore in some way subversive, of the masculine militarism of European colonialism (pp97-99). Claude McKay's community of male vagabonds in Marseilles excludes women - whilst also leaving space for the disruption of gender and sexual norms. Like the ultimate paradox that underlies Stephens' understanding of these intellectuals - that they stood both for black citizenship and for heterogeneous transnationalism - the masculinity of pan-Africanism was multivalent and complex.

The most innovative, and the clearest, contribution Stephens makes in this book is to perform gender analyses together with analysis of geography, nationalism, and diaspora in black transnationalist movements. Stephens writes after important readings of gender and black intellectualism by such critics as Carol Boyce Davis, Hazel Carby, Belinda Edmondson, and Brent Hayes Edwards - all of whom are accounted for here. She moves the debate forward by the sheer comprehensiveness of her analysis. Gender and sexual considerations are brought to bear on issues of Caribbean and postcolonial nationhood in a rigorous manner. While suppressed femininity and homoeroticism were always evident in the narratives produced by West Indian nationalists, these are only now receiving full readings.<sup>2</sup> Stephens makes a significant contribution to this emerging field here.

Stephens begins by tracing the influence of early twentieth-century models of masculinity (in the first chapter), and the impact of nineteenth-century tropes of the home (in the second chapter) on to her idea of the black global imaginary. Her readings of Dubois' and Schuyler's novels *Dark Princess* and *Black Empire* elegantly set the stage for the book's key ideas. Both these novels are racial romances, where the dream of educated black rule in pre-World War I America is evoked and transmuted into a newer vision of mobile, multi-racial governance, gathered in Europe and then diffused throughout the Atlantic. The heroes of these narratives combine 'anticolonialism and transnationalism with the discourse of the New Negro' (p72) to lay the ground for the three major figures of Stephens' study.

The chapters on Claude McKay make astute use of affective categories to deepen our understanding of *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*, and indeed of McKay's cultural politics. Lingering associations of the nation with the home mean that several of McKay's characters exhibit an 'aversion to nationalism and domestication' both, each as signs of the other (p190). Stephens writes:

As the character Ray develops over the course of the novel, it also becomes clear that his romance of the race is primarily a romance between men; in *Home to Harlem* Ray is the figure who offers the explicit critique of heterosexuality as a formation serving to domesticate the black male subject within the nation-state (p150).

Ray's move from New York to Marseilles in *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*'s community of drifters in the French port imply a turn away from the

2. For a recent example see Rhonda Cobham's lengthy essay on McKay: 'Jekyll and Claude: The Erotics of Patronage in Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom*', Cindy Patton and Benigno Sánchez-Eppler (eds), *Queer Diasporas*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2000, pp122-153.

domestic, feminised space of home and towards the construction of nascent (and masculine) transnationalism. Theirs is not mere negation, but rather an attempt to define something quite difficult: community in the company of men where 'race and nation are ultimately resolved as noncategories' (p190). France played a key role in McKay's global imagination, but Stephens also argues that the writer's romance for revolutionary Russia meant that his 'referent for the international was often Orientalist' (p172). This orientalist inclination converges on homoeroticism in an early McKay narrative like 'The Little Sheik'. Stephens goes on to show how McKay's sense of horror at the brutality of World War I combined with a sense of blacks' putative exclusion from civilization lent a unique (often ironic) perch from which to observe and critique: McKay writes in *Banjo* of 'Italians against French, French against Anglo-Saxon, English against German, the great *Daily Mail* shrieking like a mad virago ... Oh it was a great civilization indeed, too entertaining for any savage ever to have the feeling of boredom' (quoted in Stephens p190).

Civilization was a buzzword for C.L.R. James, too: he was as enamoured with the ideal of the Victorian gentleman as he was critical of European global hegemony. And as Stephens writes, for James '[t]he problem of the Negro was a problem for world civilization as a whole' (p225). His study of American civilization, no less than his research into the Haitian Revolution, emphasized James' fascination with the former slave's relationship to the state. Certainly Toussaint L'Ouverture (and his proxy on the London stage, Paul Robeson) embodied the ideal of the black emperor when James dramatized *The Black Jacobins* in the 1930s, and again in the 1960s (pp205-210). But Stephens also shows that James highlights the fugitive slave and the whale harpooner as two particularly American figures which represent the desire and potential for true national *fraternité*. The men aboard the *Pequod* in Melville's *Moby-Dick* also demonstrate the pleasures of multiracial male community. In Ishmael, James sees the American intellectual who 'step[s] outside of the domestic sphere of the United States and enter[s] into a hands-on working dialogue with colonial intellectuals of color' (p246). James' reading of the relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg shows he was alive to how profoundly homoeroticism informed this most influential allegory of nationalism. Referring to a sketch entitled 'Negroes, Women, and Intellectuals', Stephens notes that James wrestled with developing this line of thought in future writing, wondering 'what to write, how far to go, and whether to write' at all about (homo)sexuality (quoted in Stephens p247). The book he planned to develop out of the essay was never written. But as Stephens shows, James' writing on America was increasingly insightful about how gender, as well as class and colour, comprised borders to be crossed on to the way to true statehood. In America James detected a great, patriarchal, monomaniacal structure beneath which lay the impulses for true transnationalism. After he was detained in Ellis Island and forced to leave the States, he was unsurprisingly disillusioned and suspicious about America's role in the Caribbean.

Two chapters on Garvey re-read the famous Jamaican organizer in the wake of now-standard charges of essentialism, nationalism, and conservatism. Though characteristically astute, Stephens' re-visioning of this most polarizing of black nationalists is not wholly convincing. Following Ann McClintock, she argues that the racial spectacle Garvey manifested in his imperial dress, mass demonstrations, and Black Star Line of ships, amounts to 'a fetishistic performance of blackness' and 'the fetishization of an imaginary black state' (p83). For Stephens, Garvey's emphasis was global, not nationalistic. His travels throughout the Americas and Europe convinced him not so much of the need for a fixed black nation located in Africa, as for the necessity of free mobility for black subjects. This counter-intuitive thesis is well supported by Stephens' reading of Garvey's speeches and her re-assessment of the Black Star Line. I am less sure, however, of the use to which Garvey put the racial and national fetish:

In Garvey's performance of the role of the black emperor, it was the proud European empires, not the black Brutus Jones [of Eugene O'Neill's play *The Emperor Jones*] whose nakedness was ultimately revealed ... Empire's political unconscious is revealed by the colonial subject who sees beneath the robes and masks of statehood to the fetishes of racial nationalism that lie beneath the skin ... (pp96-7).

And yet, as Stephens shows, Garvey loved those robes. His adornment was not only ironic mimicry but also a serious belief in the importance of spectacle in self-governance: 'Garvey put the black emperor back in his robes and used the language of civilization to assert not just the Negro's manliness but his stateliness' (pp79-80; see also p98). Furthermore, the function of disavowal in Garvey's fetish is slightly unclear, making the psychoanalytic approach here deeply suggestive but not definitive. Stephens argues that 'the suppressed woman of color' becomes 'the repressed figure for the excess, the multiplicity, hybridity, and multinationality inherent in transnational blackness' (p83). This suggests it is the femininity of nationhood that is disavowed in Garvey's fetishistic performances. But it remains to be clarified precisely how Garvey's imperial garb subverts European nationalism whilst simultaneously promoting black transnationalism.

Despite this, Stephens' book succeeds in shedding new light on these important and familiar figures. Garvey, McKay, and James each imagined multiracial democracy in the context of travel across complex geographies, profound readings of world history, and sophisticated appropriations of the language of European revolution and nationalism. Ironically, each found his own travel at one point or another curtailed by governments. Stephens' use of biography and history enliven her insights into the way imperial discourses on gender and nation trailed in the wake of these figures' imagined 'black ships of state' (p8). Stephens covers a lot of ground here,

in fact more ground than the careful periodisation in the book's subtitle suggests. Though the outbreak of war in 1914 and the independence of Jamaica and Trinidad in 1962 are important benchmarks, she also works through earlier and later accounts of global politics. In a way, *Black Empire* spans from the New Negro to Hardt and Negri, from *Moby-Dick* to Guantanamo Bay. For the most part, however, this is a comfortable reach. Her serious and innovative analyses of gender and sexuality are exciting developments at the conjunction of Atlantic, American, and postcolonial studies.

# A LIFE LESS ORDINARY

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Joe Moran

Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006, pp448; £55 hardback.

In recent years, there has been a series of ground-clearing works in what is now called 'everyday life studies'. These works have sought to emphasize the range and richness of writings on the quotidian. Books by Michael Gardiner and Ben Highmore, for example, have shown that the everyday is a central concern in the work of many twentieth-century continental thinkers.<sup>1</sup> Michael Sheringham's engrossing book is more specific and detailed in focus, stressing instead 'the coherence of an intellectual tradition' (p6) within a particular country and period. It aims to show how the thoroughgoing analysis of *le quotidien* (a word which has rather more precision than the English 'everyday') developed in France in the decades after the Second World War.

*Everyday Life* seeks to provide 'a genealogy for the remarkable "explosion" of interest in the everyday that characterized French culture in the 1980s and 1990s' (p14). The bulk of the book offers readings of four key theorists: Henri Lefebvre, Roland Barthes, Michel de Certeau and Georges Perec. It deals with the period between 1960 and 1980 as 'a phase of active, if often invisible, invention' in the theorization of everyday life in France, when these writers produced their key works. The book's final chapters focus on the period from 1980 to 2000 and beyond, a phase of 'practice, variation, and dissemination' (p6) of these earlier theories and writings.

Sheringham begins by tracing how his four key authors drew on an earlier tradition of thinking about the everyday in the work of writers like André Breton, Michel Leiris and Raymond Queneau, as well as non-French thinkers such as Heidegger, Benjamin and Lukács. Sheringham argues that, unlike some of these earlier authors, the tradition of quotidian writing that emerged with Lefebvre refused 'to polarize the ontological and the ontic, and reject[ed] the separation between background banality and momentary illumination' (p371). Through the use of cross-referencing and biographical background, Sheringham makes a compelling case that his four writers influenced each other greatly, particularly in their attempts to find a way out of the theoretical impasse of scientific sociology in the 1960s, with its suspicion of subjectivity and lived experience.

Sheringham goes on to argue that the pioneer works of 'proximate ethnography' - the most familiar example to English readers being Marc Augé's work on the Paris métro - used this earlier work on the everyday as a way of responding to the crisis of intellectual authority in traditional anthropology. But the theorization of the quotidian also had an impact

1. Michael E. Gardiner, *Critiques of Everyday Life*, London, Routledge, 2000; Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction*, London, Routledge, 2002; Ben Highmore (ed) *The Everyday Life Reader*, London, Routledge, 2002.

beyond academia, in the work of imaginative authors and artists in the 1980s and 1990s. Sheringham shows how it fed into the work of artists (Sophie Calle, Christian Boltanski) novelists (Jean Echenoz), poets (Anne Portugal), theatre practitioners (the 'théâtre du quotidien' of Michel Vinaver and Michel Deusch) and unclassifiable non-fiction writers (Annie Ernaux, Jacques Réda).

By delineating an intellectual tradition in this careful way, reading all the works in the original and providing his own translations for the reader, Sheringham is partly aiming to address a deficiency in Anglo-American cultural studies which tends to select particular aspects of this tradition for its own purposes. Michel de Certeau's notion of reading as 'poaching', for example, has been used in Anglophone cultural studies as a model for the semiotic inventiveness of the consumer. This work has thus tended to contrast the creative practices of everyday life - watching television, listening to personal stereos, shopping in malls - with the dull monotony of quotidian routine.

Sheringham makes clear instead that Certeau's work is 'not about popular culture, nor is it a study of consumer behaviour' (p213). He discusses the specifically French influences on Certeau's work, not only the obvious (Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*) but also lesser-known texts such as Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant's *Les Ruses de l'intelligence: la métis des Grecs* (1974). He also outlines the political (and not merely micropolitical) context for Certeau's work, particularly in relation to Michel Maffesoli's rival, politically quietest manifesto, *La Conquête du présent: pour une sociologie de la vie quotidienne* (1979).

Sheringham assumes a certain acquaintance with the work of his key figures in his English-speaking readers, and spends more time on texts which will be less familiar to them. He largely ignores *Mythologies*, moving on instead to two works - *The Fashion System* and *The Empire of Signs* - which reveal Barthes's desire, shared with his other three main authors, 'not to limit the sphere of the everyday to the false consciousness of consumerism' (p176). On the same principle, Sheringham focuses mainly on the second volume of Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life* (published in English in 2002) rather than the first (translated in 1991). Oddly, though, he spends little time on the final, third volume of the *Critique*, which has just been published in English.

Sheringham seems particularly interested in the second volume because it is here that Lefebvre sets up the investigation of everyday life as a dissident tradition to sociology, social psychology and social anthropology (p174). Throughout Sheringham's book there is a tension between two different ways of registering and engaging with the everyday: the 'sociological-ethnographic' and the 'philosophical-aesthetic' (p354). As a textual critic, his sympathies and interests seem to lie more with the latter. The everyday, as delineated by his reading of these writers, is defined above all by its openness, ambiguity and indeterminacy. It incorporates

continuity but also change, repetition but also variation and evolution. It is made up of routines, but major events ... are also part of its fabric, as are festive moments, 'mini-fêtes'. It is universal ... but also variable, inflected by climate, class, and gender (p300).

The everyday is also 'at once individual and collective, anonymous and embodied, spatial and temporal' (p260). Its seminal site is the street, a place that in the work of several of these authors is 'poised between public and private spheres, a space where the intimate and personal is anonymized through chatter and hearsay' (p19).

The fluidity of the everyday, and its taken-for-granted, generic quality, mean that the central question is how it can be represented. The problem, as Lefebvre argued of the Surrealists, is that 'if we go too far, the everyday ceases to be itself: it becomes the exceptional, the exotic, the marvellous' (p23). There is a tendency to analyse the everyday according to some notion of predetermined significance. Anthropologists might try to distinguish between meaningful ritual and mundane habit; sociologists might try to quantify daily life, only to find that '*quotidienneté* dissolves (into statistics, properties, data) when the everyday is made an object of scrutiny' (p360). Sheringham argues that his authors were instead fundamentally concerned with the question of representation, and sought a mode of analysis that would reflect the elusiveness of the everyday itself.

Sheringham sees the French writing and art of the quotidian that emerged at the end of the millennium as a similar engagement with the problem of form. Here the novel makes way for a hybrid, documentary-style genre melding autobiography, journal writing and travel literature. The favoured mode of many of these younger writers is the essay, which from Michel de Montaigne onwards has resisted the systematizations of science and scholasticism in 'solidarity with the concrete, run-of-the-mill, experience of the ordinary mortal' (p48).

The master of this self-reflexive, essayistic form is Georges Perec, and Sheringham clearly sees one of his tasks as being to restore Perec to his rightful place in this intellectual tradition. Perhaps because his work is lighter and more playful in tone, it has received less attention than Lefebvre, Certeau and Barthes, particularly in Anglophone criticism. The writer Gilbert Adair did produce an Anglicized reworking of *Je me souviens* in his book *Myths and Memories* (1986), which also sought to introduce Barthes's *Mythologies* to non-academic English readers, but Perec's work remains relatively obscure.

Many of Perec's stories and essays include encyclopaedic listings of places, objects and sensations. In *Espèces d'espaces* (1974), he makes a series of inventories of his bedroom, apartment and neighbourhood, and encourages his readers to think critically about how streets are named, houses are numbered and cars are parked: 'You must set about it more slowly, almost stupidly. Force yourself to write down what is of no interest, what is most obvious, most common, most colourless'. The aim of these exercises is to



access what Perec calls 'the infra-ordinary', the sphere of existence that lies beneath notice or comment, and within which 'we sleep through our lives in a dreamless sleep'.<sup>2</sup> In order to access this sphere, the world has to be observed as neutrally and contemplatively as possible, without pretensions or prejudgements.

2. Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, John Sturrock (ed and trans), London, Penguin, 1999, p50 and p210.

Behind the deceptive simplicity of Perec's work, its 'two-way interaction between the work of attention and the generation of categories and oppositions' (p264), Sheringham argues that he is as politically and intellectually engaged as Lefebvre, Barthes and Certeau. In *Je me souviens*, a kind of ritualistic incantation of banal generational memories, Sheringham suggests that Perec uses the everyday as a route to a cultural memory stripped of sentimentalized nostalgia (pp259-60).

Sheringham sees Perec's influence in the genre of quotidian travel writing that emerged in France in the 1980s and 1990s: Julio Cortazar and Carol Dunlop's account of their journey from Paris to Marseilles in a Volkswagen camper van, Jean Rolin's adventures in the Parisian *banlieues*, Jacques Réda's attempt to walk the line of the Paris meridian, and François Bon's and François Maspéro's journeys on commuter trains. Like Perec, these authors treat routine journeys as intrepid adventures, and establish apparently arbitrary ground rules for each project as a way of engaging with the everyday, a sphere which necessitates indirection and generic instability in order to apprehend it.

Sheringham clearly has more sympathy with this genre of quotidian writing than the popular works of philosophy which have been most English readers' encounter with the post-Perequian tradition, and whose nearest English equivalent are probably the works of Alain de Botton. Philippe Delerm's bestselling *La Première Gorgée de bière et autres plaisirs minuscules* (1997), translated as *The Small Pleasures of Life* (1998), consists of a series of brief essays on daily pleasures such as shelling peas, reading on the beach or travelling on an old train. Delerm has also produced children's books which, in a tone not markedly different from the adult versions, decode the delights of eating a hamburger, appearing in the school play or doing homework at the kitchen table. Even more successful in Britain have been Roger-Pol Droit's *101 Experiments in the Philosophy of Everyday Life* (2003) and *How Are Things? A Philosophical Experience* (2005). Droit devises a series of Perequian experiments, such as counting to a thousand or taking the métro without having a specific destination in mind, which are all designed to bring about a 'petit dé clic' (little jolt) in how we see the world. At turns charming and banal, they view the everyday as a 'gateway to the sublime' (p357) in a way which has more in common with self-help books than the critical tradition that Sheringham is examining.

Sheringham's book is so obviously steeped in French writing and culture that his brief discussions of Anglo-American texts at the end - the film *Groundhog Day*, Lou Reed's song, 'Perfect Day', and the work of the philosopher Stanley Cavell - seem slightly intrusive. I would also like to have read more about the shifts in French political and cultural

life over the last few decades which might have necessitated new ways of theorizing the everyday, rather than simply the passing on of an intellectual tradition. The Lefebvrian tradition of writing about the quotidian centred on what he called 'bureaucratic capitalism', a new kind of managerial intervention into daily routines. Its context was a French tradition of political *dirigisme*, as well as a more general shift in western Europe in the postwar period, as the state became increasingly involved in housing, transport and urban reconstruction, producing what Lefebvre called 'a parody of socialism, a communitarian fiction with a capitalist content'.<sup>3</sup> Sheringham acknowledges this context when he writes more generally about the everyday as 'an ethical value that is constantly under threat' from 'bureaucratic reason' and the 'dangers of indifference and standardization' (p290).

3. Henri Lefebvre, *The Explosion: Marxism and the French Revolution*, Alfred Ehrenfeld (trans), New York, Monthly Review Press, 1969, p40.

The more recent ascendancy of neo-liberalism, reflected in a wave of privatisation reform in France from the late 1990s onwards, brings a new perspective to the Lefebvrian critique of large-scale planning and technocratic expertise. The New Right's ideological outmanoeuvring of the Left over the last few decades, in which it has appropriated an anti-statist rhetoric associated initially with progressive protest in the 1960s, has partly been fought on the terrain of everyday life. Sheringham's careful unearthing of an intellectual tradition suggests a broad continuity in the work of these critics, writers and artists from the 1950s to the 1990s. Arguably, though, more recent transformations in daily life have been bound up with a different set of social and political problems.

In some ways, Sheringham's book can be seen as a response and companion piece to Kristin Ross's *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies* (1995), the periodization of which is less broad but overlaps with his. Ross's study of the representations and mentalities of French daily life between the mid-1950s and mid-1960s uses a wider range of cultural texts than Sheringham - advertisements, novels, films, magazines, material culture - to suggest that the category of 'the everyday' in this period was a way of both imagining social change and defusing its politics. For Ross, this new understanding of the everyday rested on a separation of public from private life, typified by the work and commuting routines of a new, status-conscious class of *jeunes cadres*, and the 'democracy of consumption' of the Ideal Home. These new life patterns became a way of celebrating but also 'reenfolding' modernization, naturalizing it and making it unthreatening to the middle classes, allowing it to function as 'the alibi of a class society'.<sup>4</sup> Ross argues that this version of everyday life served as both a distraction from the traumas of decolonisation, and a reproduction of colonial logic in its dispersal of the working classes to the suburbs, and its policing of domestic space in the form of new concerns about household management.

4. Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1995, p89 and p13.

Ross offers a series of brilliant, suggestive readings of cultural texts as an engagement with this historical problematic. She discusses many of the same theorists as Sheringham - Lefebvre, Perec, the Situationists - but sees them as offering a primarily negative, realist critique of dominant representations

of the everyday, exposing the more complex, lived reality behind these idealizations. Through his more developed readings of these theorists, Sheringham argues that they sought to draw out the utopian elements of everyday life, and were not simply 'realist' in mode but concerned with the central problem of how to represent the everyday (pp10-11). Sheringham's book has clearly involved years of considered thinking and reading on mundane life and its most indefatigable French theorists and critics. The readings of individual authors and texts are always careful and illuminating. His book is a distinguished addition to the growing academic literature on the everyday.

# SPECTACULAR CONFLICTS, NAKED EMPIRES, AND THE COLONIZATION OF SOCIAL LIFE

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*Ramaswami Harindranath*

Retort (Iain Boal, T.J. Clark, Joseph Matthews, Michael Watts) *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in the New Age*, Verso, London, 2005, pp211; £9.99 paperback.

Susan Willis, *Portents of the Real: A Primer for Post-9/11 America*, Verso, London, 2005, pp146; £15.99 hardback.

Samir Amin, *The Liberal Virus: Permanent War and the Americanization of the World*. Pluto Press, London, 2004, pp128; £9.99 paperback.

In April 2007 global television news channels carried images of a dozen young British men and a woman captured by Iran in allegedly Iranian waters. What did Iran stand to gain in parading on television the hapless British sailors? What did Ahmadinejad seek to achieve in his subsequent declaration - on television - that the captured sailors were being released as an Easter 'gift to Britain'? While the question of whether or not the sailors had transgressed international maritime boundaries may never be determined with any certainty, what is perhaps even more significant is the ostentation of the display of the young sailors on Iranian television, and a subsequent counter-display after their release on British television. The capture itself seemed incidental to the jostling for position in terms of spectacle. Seemingly dissatisfied with the infliction of manifold destruction, the contagion of conflict has taken on another dimension, that of imagery. In the context of instantaneous global communication and satellite broadcasting, images have assumed a specific currency. As Retort note, 'outright defeat in the war of appearance is something that no present-day hegemon can tolerate' (p14). Later on in the book they declare: 'the present madness is singular: the dimension of spectacle has never before interfered so palpably, so insistently, with the business of keeping one's satrapies in order' (p37).

If, as Roger Scruton and others have argued, 9/11 was a watershed event, a global historical moment, what does the event signify, what changes did it inaugurate, and what forces did it unleash?<sup>1</sup> There has been a raft of academic research and publications on post-September 11 global culture. A few have examined how the immediacy of television and new technologies of communication have contributed to the dissemination of images of terrorism in real time, and the social and political consequences of this.<sup>2</sup> In *Portents of the Real: a Primer for Post-9/11 America* Susan Willis, informed by cultural studies,

1. Roger Scruton, *The West and the Rest: Globalization and the Terrorist Threat*, London, Continuum, 2005.

2. James Der Derian, 'Imaging Terror: Logos, Pathos, and Ethos', *Third World Quarterly*, 26, 1 (2005): 5-22.

provides a complex commentary on the political ramifications of 'the culture of pathological worry' and the state-sanctioned 'narrative of good vs evil'. Studies with a broader remit have sought to examine the media images as 'spectacle', characteristic of the post-Fordist age. A recent example of this is Retort's *Afflicted Powers*, which revives Marx's notion of primitive accumulation and combines it with Guy Debord's theories on spectacle to analyse post-9/11 global politics and Empire. Samir Amin's argument in *The Liberal Virus* is an extension of his abiding concern with the economic and political domination of developing world, in this instance the pernicious influence of American style politics and the urgent need for the revival of real democracy as a force for change. The three books share a common concern with the current state of affairs in global politics, although they differ in their emphasis and their focus. All three have as their central concern the contemporary manifestations of American power, both within the country and globally.

In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag alludes to the paradoxical status of representations in contemporary media-rich societies: 'something becomes real - to those who are elsewhere, following it as "news" - by being photographed. But a catastrophe that is experienced will often seem eerily like its representation. The attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, was described as "unreal", "surreal", "like a movie", in many of the accounts of those who escaped from the towers or watched from nearby'.<sup>3</sup> It has become *de rigueur* among a few theorists that in the current media saturated world the image reigns supreme, has even taken over as 'real' experience. Sontag's point however is different, not so much that the image has supplanted the real, but that the vocabulary available to us to describe and even experience spectacular incidents is informed by mediated imagery. Retort's main proposal, on which the book builds a complex conceptual edifice that includes a critique of the 'blood for oil' argument from the anti-war Left, and a framework for the examination of war as image control and as neo-liberal extension of the policy of primitive accumulation, is that the attacks of 9/11 wounded the heart of Empire, threatened its spectacular pre-eminence, and created 'afflicted powers'. This polemical, indignant tract performs a complex juggling act with three main spheres of concern: spectacle, war, and capital.

'To what extent', it asks, 'did September 11, and the American state's response to it, usher in a new geopolitical era? This is a question about empire. It leads to another: To what extent have the events of September 11 obliged - and provided an opportunity for - American capital and its state executor to embark on a fresh phase of imperial business as usual?' (p78). A feature of this is the continuation of 'permanent war' as a strategy, which is analysed in the book in terms of its links to 'the state' and capital on the one hand, and to modernity. The invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq is in other words, not a novel feature in the militarisation of politics, as has been claimed, but an 'unbroken line' of American interventions elsewhere in pursuit of primitive accumulation. 'War, in a word, is modernity incarnate', Retort proclaims,

3. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, London, Penguin, 2003, p19.

and the new stage in its development is 'the image-management of society' (p79). The sheer spectacle of the attacks of September 11 permitted the propaganda machine of the American state to use it as an act of 'evil', which, along with the subsequent narratives of weapons of mass destruction and the identification of the 'axis of evil' allowed the invasion of Iraq. The conflict and ensuing occupation has benefited the American state not only in terms of the colonization and control of resources - the naked interests of capital - but also in redressing the assault on its erstwhile control of spectacle. As the action of a state negotiating its economic interests and the wounds to its image-management, war therefore constitutes the link between neoliberalism, spectacle, and primitive accumulation. The 'blood for oil' argument is at best only partial, since it overlooks the significance of the state's frantic attempts to recover spectacle. For Retort, both war and terror are spectacle, and the strategies of the Left, currently scrambling for a platform from which to launch an effective alternative and a critique, should recognise that aspect of American foreign policy.

Spectacle informs the response of radical Islam too, Retort maintain, as it is equally enamoured of the realm of appearances and the politics of spectacle. Its extremist adherents, critical of the centrality of the image in the 'deadly solicitations of the market' (p19) and uncomfortably aware of Islam's disavowal of the image, have been caught in a double bind. As a response to the excesses of modern capital, they seek to reject the latter's symbolic vacuity, even while they exploit all that the image can offer in the sphere of global politics. For Retort, 'the webmasters of revolutionary Islam' are the devotees of the image: 'they are the ones that drink deep, to the point of intoxication, on the spectacle's *derealization* of politics' (p188, emphasis in the original).

Retort's appeal to Guy Debord's theory on the spectacle is shared by Willis in her assessment of everyday life in contemporary America. If, unlike Hardt and Negri's argument in *Empire, Afflicted Powers* recognises the centrality of the American state in present-day formations of empire manifested in its pursuit of strategic interests of capturing emerging markets for Western capital through military intervention and regime changes, Willis offers a coruscating critique of post-9/11 everyday America through the 'oblique lens of culture'. There is little oblique about her assessment of the unappealing underside of American culture contaminated by unsavoury displays of patriotism. 'America lives its history as cultural production', she offers at the outset: 'America is in popular genre hyperdrive, churning out formulaic fictions in a frenzied attempt to determine who we are and what we're doing. Our historical moment is like a cineplex where every genre is playing simultaneously' (p7). Her declared intention is to build on analyses offered by 'outsiders looking in on us', Baudrillard, Virilio, and Žižek, to 'unpack culture with the tools of culture'.

Willis turns her lens on the anthrax hoax, the sniper attacks in Washington, state sponsored violence, shadow government, and on that public demonstration of patriotism that is peculiar to the United States -

the display of flags in public and private building, vehicles, shopping malls, clothing, and flags transported to space. The specific currency of patriotism, the particular shape and meaning it assumes, derives from the context of its display. Various, the flag becomes a 'sliding signifier', a 'circulating signifier', 'an empty signifier', and a fashion statement, through all of which runs the fervent proclamations of patriotism by a populace emotionally scarred in the aftermath of 9/11. True to its fascination with popular genres, America craves closure, which in this case, arrives in the form of Bush's announcement of 'mission accomplished' in a carefully managed televisual spectacle, and in the imminent capture of Bin Laden and destruction of Al Qaeda. Alongside the American, Afghan, and Iraqi deaths (the latter, despite being considerably more, being far outweighed by the images of the 'handful of American deaths' whose value is 'calculated as each was brought home for televised memorials') there is another casualty - the demise of ambiguity. The deep antipathy to it, argues Willis, is revealed in the prevalence of 'a culture whose passion is reduced to the literal has become the epitome of the fundamentalism for which we condemn the Taliban' (p24).

The anthrax hoax, 'a symbolic ploy that takes aim at the spectacular', and throws the quotidian normality of American life, disrupting production time and therefore capital by fracturing 'the boring linearity of time on the job or at school', is a supreme exemplar of Baudrillard's assertion regarding the relations between simulation and the real. On the media the hoax was played out as if it was real, blurring the distinction between entertainment and news. 'Guy Debord's definition of the spectacle is a truism. In the context of a society bemused by its own spectacle, the hoax event functions counter-intuitively as the truth that unmasks the lie that we take for reality' (p42). The sniper attacks on the other hand, by engendering anxiety in the performance of day-to-day activity through their attacks in petrol stations and shopping malls, made the familiar unfamiliar, every day occurrences as a threat, almost to existential proportions. The residents in the 'exurb' of Montgomery county, congregating in their 'anomalous cul-de-sac neighbourhoods' were jolted out of their complacency. The attacks struck at their consumerist lifestyles and their isolation from other communities. Cocooned within their information-rich, electronic device driven lives, the exurbanites had been immune to the existence of those outside the gates. To Willis this is analogous to the ignorance of the American populace of the realities of the Gulf wars, witnessing them in the comfort of their living rooms as a television show. This is not a startling or novel observation, but Willis goes on to make the point that US imperialism at the advent of the current century 'enacts empire as a continuous globalized circuit of control and domination. There is no "here" and "there", but rather a Moebius strip on a global scale', in which a world 'defined by global capitalism flattens difference in the drive to produce a continuous circuit of production and exchange' (p61). This is a telling point, and illustrates Willis' technique of drawing insightful observations from her analysis of the banality of American everyday life. To her, the sniper is a 'bolt

of fantasmic reality', who brought to the homefront the excesses of American imperialist ventures. Referring variously to Sartre, Marx, Lacan, Baudrillard, Žižek, Willis presents a convincing and impassioned critique of aspects of American life. The book exemplifies the fecundity of cultural critique in the hands of an expert who utilises her erudition to make the most unobvious and yet telling connections between unlikely points on the global scale. 'We have now entered a world where the code is reality. The human genome is our meaning', she argues, on her way to making a case for the blurring of boundaries between the symbolic, the imaginary and the real, epitomised in the grotesque Operation Robin Sage, 'intended to give Green Beret trainees a taste for unconventional warfare' (p87), in which the everyday is turned into simulation, and civilians are recruited to play different roles. The result is confusion, in which an armed civilian in camouflage could be an army recruit and a trainee in civvies could pass for a civilian. In a land where the Patriot Act invites citizens to continually declare their allegiance to the nation, and where racial profiling has taken on a novel configuration, such confusion has real and unfortunate consequences.

The subtitle of Amin's book: 'Permanent War and the Americanization of the World', underlines concerns that it shares with *Afflicted Powers*. Amin is primarily concerned with the extent to which neoliberal orthodoxies have, in their manifestation as IMF and World Bank policies, destroyed local lives in the developing world. The exaltation of the market collides with social concerns and democratic functioning, and in the new orthodoxy the market always rules. His main thesis in this book is that the theoretical scaffolding on which the liberal policies are constructed is largely hollow. While the liberal propositions give the impression of being eternal truths, 'these ideas are nothing but nonsense, founded on a para-science - so-called pure economics - and an accompanying ideology - postmodernism'. This type of economic thinking is a theory not of really existing capitalism, but an imaginary one. 'It is only a para-science, closer in fact to sorcery than to the natural sciences which it pretends to imitate' (p11). Dismal science indeed. This discourse confuses the reality - capitalist expansion - with the desirable - development, as part of its obfuscation of the real consequences of neoliberal policies. Similarly, the claim that free market capitalism generates competition hides the distinctions between the market and capitalism. While the former refers to competition, the latter 'is defined precisely by the limits to competition that the monopoly or oligopoly (for some people, to the exclusion of others) of private property implies' (p17). As for the American imperium, its championing of the free market, supported by the 'para-science' of neo-liberal theory, is but an excuse for the expansion of its power. Amin is at pains to demonstrate that the Empire has no convincing argument with which to cover itself. He dismisses as naïve Hardt and Negri's claim that the new-style Empire has no centre, that it is a network of powers. For him, on the contrary, the new imperialism has a well-defined centre, what he calls 'the Triad' - the United States, Europe and Japan - supported by global institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank,



'and a center of the center aspiring to exercise its hegemony - the United States' (p25).

Amin's concerns regarding the debilitating consequences of neo-liberalism's erosion of political practice is similar to Retort's argument about 'weak citizenship'. Amin's principal worry is that democratic practice has been emptied of all content, leading to "low-intensity democracy" - that is, to electoral buffooneries where parades of majorettes take the place of programs, to the "society of spectacle" (p21). He recommends the implementation of regulatory policies to address the pauperisation and polarisation of the majority of the world's population. Achieving this requires redefining the European liberal project, re-establishing the solidarity of the peoples of the South, and reconstructing a 'peoples' internationalism'. His strategies for the latter are based on nine 'hypotheses', ranging from 'the battle must be engaged directly on the world market and won on this terrain' (p103) to 'Europe should and can liberate itself from the liberal virus. However, this initiative cannot come from the segments of dominant capital, but must come from the people' (p108), to '[q]uestions relative to cultural diversity should be discussed within the context of the new international perspectives outlined here' (p111).

The three volumes are arguably political pamphlets, provocative and indignant in their analysis of contemporary global economics and cultural politics. They are concerned with the evacuation of real democracy and the pre-eminence of the media and spectacle in current political formations, with the consequences of American military and ideological interventions in the rest of the world as a strategy to entrench the interests of capital, and with the colonization of everyday life. Together and singly these books constitute an important and necessary critique, and provide a vocabulary and conceptual framework with which to bolster the politics of the Left.

# FORM, FUNCTION, UTOPIA

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*Malcolm Miles*

David Pinder, *Visions of the City: Utopianism, Power and Politics in Twentieth-Century Urbanism*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2005, pp320; £18.99 paperback.

Interest in utopianism undergoes periodic rises and declines. The 1990s saw a distinctly dystopian phase in urban commentary, when cities were scripted for a disaster scenario which became all too real with the destruction of the World Trade Centre, New York in 2001. Since then there has been a renewed interest in utopian architecture and theory. This is not to say such interest died away for those committed to it. But either coincidentally, or to displace attention from the real to the desired in fear of worse times to come, or more positively as realisation that there are alternatives to the social, political, economic and cultural conditions in which a war on terror replaces the Cold War, utopianism is rising now on academic and cultural agendas.

Academic interest in utopianism is strongest in the social sciences. But this runs parallel to increasing practical interest among architects in low-energy housing, sustainable communities, and the use of low-impact materials such as straw bales and rammed earth in experimental buildings. And both academic and practical interests run parallel to emergent political forms in anti-capitalist activism and environmentalism. This is the general context for David Pinder's book on utopianism, power, and politics, covering the period from the 1890s to the 1960s. Among other contributions to the literature are reconsiderations of Ebenezer Howard,<sup>1</sup> the International Congress on Modern Architecture (CIAM),<sup>2</sup> and Situationism.<sup>3</sup> These deal with discrete cases of utopianism while Pinder brings together material from all of them to construct a continuity of tension between utopian dreams of a just and free society and utopian delusions of power.

Perhaps the most helpful aspect of the book is that it contributes to analyses of the evident failure of utopian aspirations during the inter- and post-war periods in such a way that the dimensions that might inform today's efforts towards a utopian future are separated from the romantic, idealist, sentimental, and nostalgic baggage found in most utopian tracts. Within this, Pinder attempts two tasks: a critical reading of the work of utopian urbanists from Morris and Howard, through Le Corbusier, the Letterist International and Situationism to the Dutch artist Constant's vision of a new urbanism in his long-term project, *New Babylon*; and a reconsideration of the idea of utopia in terms of its political content. He states in his Introduction that to look again at the Situationists, for instance, is to be reminded that their work questioned the structures of power and value prevalent in Paris in the 1960s, and was not merely a departure from

1. Peter Hall and Colin Ward, *Sociable Cities: the legacy of Ebenezer Howard*, Chichester, Wiley, 1998.

2. Barry Curtis, 'The Heart of the City', Jonathan Hughes and Simon Sadler (eds), *Non-Plan: Essays on Freedom, Participation and Change in Modern Architecture and Urbanism*, Oxford, Architectural Press, 2000.

3. Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1998

conventional aesthetics. Pinder refuses the respectability which has attached to Situationism in accounts which encapsulate it in history, and views it as retaining relevance to today's contestations of power. He is aware, still, that much discussion of utopian theory gives a feeling of being after the event, either academic in its self-sufficiency or contained in a periodisation of the past, and that even sympathetic critics such as Susan Buck-Morss regard utopia as a concept unavailable for mass society. Pinder goes some way to counter this negativity in a carefully critical inquiry, while avoiding the danger of being captured by his material.

The book's chapters work in pairs. The first sets out the book's arguments and the second grounds them in a reconsideration of what Pinder terms the restorative utopia of the Garden City. Chapters 3 and 4 look at Le Corbusier's modernist utopia. Chapters 5 and 6 move through Surrealism to Situationism and a ludic vision of the city. Chapter 7 deals with Constant's *New Babylon* in the 1950s to 1970s, and leads to a concluding chapter on utopian potential in the early twenty-first century. To give two chapters to Le Corbusier's utopianism, which I would see as characterised by a fantasy of omnipotence, might be questioned. But it enables Pinder to draw out in depth some of the inherent contradictions of a utopian attitude to city planning and architectural design which are found in Le Corbusier's work, but by no means only there.

This drawing out of a concise argument from the complexities and internal fractures of the material is the consistent achievement of the book. It begins in Pinder's discussion of the Garden City, where he differentiates between Howard's vision of a city of well-being, influenced by utopian socialism and Kropotkin's anarchism, and the regressive and visually medievalist designs of Raymond Unwin and Barry Parker, the architects of Letchworth. In retrospect the suburbanism of Unwin and Parker has been a more lasting influence on British town and country planning - a quaint term compared to the urbanisation of other European planning regimes - than Howard's social vision, but this does not mean that Howard's radicalism is not worth recovery now. Quite the opposite, as Pinder explains; there are ideas and values in the Garden City as first conceived which resonate with efforts to design sustainable cities today. The difficulty is that Howard's vision is articulated as a set of diagrams in part based on a romanticised idea of country life, for which the missing link was money and not a deeper understanding of social formation. Hence his early intention that dwellers should have common ownership of the land on which the Garden City was to be built was defeated by the need to raise capital from a small group of philanthropists embedded in the dominant society's mechanisms of exchange. The anarchistic side of Howard remains, though, in his early writing.

Pinder takes a similarly balanced, even dispassionate, interest in Le Corbusier, comparing his position with de Certeau's and noting his interest in jazz as a fusion of sensuality and the mechanical. Le Corbusier emerges from this account considerably less damaged than he does in, say, Beatriz Colomina's critique of him via Freud and theories of visuality, not least in her discussion of his treatment of a villa by Eileen Grey, in *Privacy and Publicity*.<sup>4</sup> Pinder does

4. Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1996.

5. Zeynep Çelik,  
'Le Corbusier,  
Orientalism,  
Colonialism',  
*Assemblage*, 17, April  
1992.

not go along this path, and omits, too, a discussion of Le Corbusier's brief and opportunist attachment to French fascism in the 1920s - the only kind of state likely to assume enough power over civil society to adopt his plans. Nor does he mention Zeynep Çelik's incisive critique of Le Corbusier's orientalism.<sup>5</sup> The latter might be thought a key factor in Le Corbusier's plans for the rebuilding of Algiers as a modernist city of soaring white blocks and sweeping freeways after demolition of most of the Arab city. Leaving that aside, what remains interesting in Pinder's account is the continuation of a complex argument from the chapter on Howard into the reassessment of Le Corbusier, revolving around an axis of the organic and the mechanistic.

For Howard, Pinder relates, a city had a natural size and scale as well as form. This organic city was, or rather would be if it existed, healthy in a physical as well as psychological way. The cities of late nineteenth-century industrialisation, in contrast, were visible and tangible symptoms of a disease, or disturbance of a naturally given equilibrium, like a rash of ulcers dotted over the hitherto green land. Pinder draws attention to the role of naturalisation in Howard's vision, and its replication by later urbanists such as Lewis Mumford. Naturalism masks the particularities of ideas by subsuming them in a generalised pursuit of a supposedly nicer way of dwelling; and it leads to a depoliticisation of urban theory subsumed in a holism taken to stand for a self-evident common good and recovery of a supposedly lost social coherence. Howard believed in this, and in the potential of a rational spatial ordering as a means of its delivery. Le Corbusier's belief in the rightness of his ideas was less flexible than Howard's. For Le Corbusier, the skyscrapers of New York were, he announced on his first visit, too thin and too close together. In Le Corbusier's words, cited by Pinder, the skyscrapers were like a human figure whose organic life is disturbed, its legs too long by up to twenty times. It is simplistic to say that applications of Le Corbusier's ideas in post-war social housing schemes were a disaster for those moved there from inner-city neighbourhoods, and Pinder avoids setting him up in this way. The situation is indeed more complex, and Le Corbusier maintained contradictory feelings about New York. He was, as Pinder says, drawn into liking the city at the same time as seeing it as a monstrous and disruptive threat to spatial ordering. The city was a mess in need of cleaning up, perhaps, but also too total an experience, too much city as event, and decidedly modern, to be dismissed. When he fantasises the destruction and rebuilding of cities such as Paris, Buenos Aires, or Algiers, Le Corbusier projects the monstrous element onto their extant fabrics, as if a deformity to be cured by his surgical glance (though, since his plans were never adopted, only in drawings and models). But in his paintings, and through his links to artists such as Ozenfant and Léger, as in his appreciation of jazz, the organic is reasserted. Just as in Howard's vision the organic is fused with the rational, so in Le Corbusier's mental terrain it is at times confused with and at times aligned against the mechanistic. This contradiction of a desire for sensuous touch and resort to a metaphorical scalpel may have wider implications for utopian theory.

Pinder's discussion of the COBRA artist (or ex-artist as he put it himself)

Constant and *New Babylon* is central to the book's critique of utopianism as an inherently political and practical idea which has been aestheticised and depoliticised in many of its histories, not least by its own adherents. The work of COBRA - a name derived from the cities in which the group operated, Copenhagen, Brussels, Amsterdam - is neglected in comparison to a growth industry of books on Situationism, perhaps because a significant part of the literature is in Danish and Dutch. But their work is just as interesting, and over a longer period and across art, architecture and theory (though Constant had links to Situationism as well as to COBRA). Constant foresaw a radically new kind of city consisting of vast networks of spaces and forms, at different levels and stretching without boundaries across a landscape. That it was a fictive landscape which served as foil to the form depicted, like the background against which a figure stands in portraiture, suggests the concept is aesthetic; but for Constant *New Babylon* was a vehicle through which, at least, to challenge the conventions of post-war urbanism. These included a faith in design solutions for human society, and in the expertise of architects to produce them, both in the modernist utopian mould. Some younger architects within CIAM disputed this. But Constant, if largely outside such architectural elites (except for his contact with Aldo van Eyck, a member of CIAM, who designed the COBRA exhibition in Amsterdam in 1949), produced an alternative to it.

Perhaps the link to Situationism was crucial here, and Pinder develops the nomadic theme - which might be compared to the Situationist drift as a non-teleological process - as a utilisation of mechanisation in service of a road to human freedom. He emphasises that for Constant technology made possibilities from what had hitherto been dreams or aesthetic ideas. Although in retrospect it exhibits the contradiction of designing a fixed site for a nomadic group, Constant's 1956 model for a gypsy camp expresses a potential for a social formation no longer tied to a built environment fixed by designs made on an assumption of permanence, but which is flexible in use. From this he evolved the project of *New Babylon* as site of a nomadic - and ludic - society. Today it looks dated, part of the humanism of the post-war era; but as Pinder's reconsideration of Constant demonstrates the idea of the open-ended, ludic city remains interesting. Pinder concludes by arguing for a distinctive utopianism. This will be more situated and contingent than past visions, and more flexible. Underpinning this aim and derived largely from his work on Le Corbusier and Constant is Pinder's recognition that utopianism sways between free imagination and restriction, between a desire for social freedom and the means to control society, and between radical openness and a tendency to articulate forms and structures which reproduce present strictures. Key to this, as Pinder argues, is an ability to imagine alternatives within the difficulties of present conditions and value systems, a plea not unlike that made by Adorno and Horkheimer for revision within rationality, at the end of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.<sup>6</sup> It might be permanent cultural revolution, or the city as play: something to think about. Pinder's book will aid the process considerably.

6. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, London, Verso, 1997 [first published 1949].

## BOOKNOTES

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Gary Hall and Clare Birchall (eds), *New Cultural Studies: Adventures in Theory*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2006, pp256; £16.99 paperback.

With this book Gary Hall and Clare Birchall offer an exciting new approach to cultural studies. Reconnecting the roots of cultural studies with current political and theoretical transformations, from anti-capitalist movements to Agamben and Badiou, this book presents an overview of new possibilities for cultural studies today. The greatest merit of the book is that in merging recent theoretical issues with cultural studies it also introduces a 'new generation' (p5) of cultural theorists. Birchall and Hall are quick to point out that it 'is not really a generation at all' (p5) if by a generation one understands a group of scholars that all share a similar approach to cultural studies. If anything this book shows just how many ways one can use contemporary theory to reinvigorate the practice of cultural studies. It is not a new generation since it does not 'reject' the older generation of cultural theorists. To the contrary, speaking of a new generation here means that all contributors share a strong commitment to both the original aims and ambitions of cultural studies and to contemporary theory - to the adventure that theory can present to cultural studies. The book deals with a wide range of topics, not all of which are exclusively oriented to theoretical problems. *New Cultural Studies* does not tell you how you *should* do cultural studies (it is not a manual in that sense); it effectively demonstrates in how many possible ways you *could* do cultural studies (in this it greatly expands cultural studies' horizons).

The book is divided into four parts. The first part confronts cultural studies with theoretical issues like 'deconstruction' (Gary Hall), 'post-marxism' (Jeremy Valentine), 'ethics' (Joanna Zylinska), and 'German media theory' (Geoffrey Winthrop-Young). Each of these essays makes a convincing plea for the pertinence of these research fields to cultural studies. The second part of the book is called 'new theorists' and contains studies on cultural studies in relation to Gilles Deleuze (Gregory J. Seigworth), Giorgio Agamben (Brett Neilson), Alain Badiou (Julian Murphet) and Slavoj Žižek (Paul Bowman). Seigworth's essay gives a stimulating reading of Gilles Deleuze and Raymond Williams, demonstrating how Deleuze's concept of experience enables one to further develop Williams' 'culturalism', which 'adopted a remarkably similar ontological cast' (p109). Paul Bowman's essay aptly illustrates the necessity for a critical encounter between cultural studies and theory by reading Žižek's critique of cultural studies as 'a compliment, demonstrating his conviction of the importance of cultural studies' (p174). Its importance, Bowman convincingly argues, lies in its aspiration to make 'effective ethical and political interventions' (p174). Such an aspiration is also the common

denominator for the third part of the book. It engages with recent issues in the field of politics and culture, such as 'anti-capitalism' (Jeremy Gilbert), 'the transnational' (Imre Szeman), and 'new media' (Caroline Bassett). The fourth part includes essays that escape any one category; it thus truly deserves its title 'new adventures'. Here, cultural studies is brought into contact with issues like 'Rem Koolhaas' project on the city' (J. Macgregor Wise), 'posthumanities' (Neil Badmington), 'the extreme' (Dave Boothroyd) and 'the secret' (Clare Birchall).

Because of the high quality of each individual contribution as well as the consistent build-up of the book in its entirety, this book is to be highly recommended to anyone whose research touches upon cultural studies in relation to theory. Making a strong case for the vibrant state of cultural studies today, the book presents a collection of superb essays by a group of scholars whose work will be of growing importance for cultural studies in the next ten years.

*Bram Ieven*

Mark Sandberg, *Living Pictures, Missing Persons: Mannequins, Museums and Modernity*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2003, pp330; £18.95 paperback.

Mark Sandberg's book is remarkable both in its Scandinavian focus, and in its argument about the modernity of museum spectatorship. Sandberg demonstrates how theories of identification, absence, narrative and spectatorship - developed in film theory - can be productively applied to nineteenth century museum mannequin displays and tableaux. Yet he avoids the tendency of film scholars to treat such displays as the ancestors of film. A film-oriented interest in disembodied forms of representation suggests that while the mobile gaze encouraged by these forms of display was peculiarly modern, the collection of actual physical things was not. Though he acknowledges that competition with cinema forced the closure of the Scandinavian panoptika, Sandberg argues against the view that such material displays constitute a pre-cinematic history. It was not superseded, but transformed into the immersive display practices that exist today.

The book deals with Scandinavian wax museums (Panoptika) and folk museums. Sandberg analyses the possibilities for spectatorship they enable, via a close study of journalistic, literary and visitor accounts as well as archive photographs, written guides and catalogues. The emphasis throughout is on mobility: the experiences of disorientation, displacement and migration, as well as class mobility, associated with modernity. Instead of arguing that modernity actually made everyone's experience more mobile and fragmented, he argues that this was a perception of the period, which led to a related perception of the past as both static and whole.

Sandberg links the Panoptikon's use of tableau display to its attempt to

establish itself as a modern and bourgeois institution. Although the waxwork did not have the circulatory mobility of recording media, it shared with them a claim to authenticity, underwritten by the presence of original collected objects. The development of the tableau form of display is an indicator of the high stakes of realism, as well as of an increasing investment in diegesis and the production of voyeuristic spectator positions, which parallels the development of narrative cinema. Through the tableau, the Scandinavian folk museums produced an impression of folk culture as whole and continuous, a vision which corresponded to images already circulating in the culture. What these museums captured in their 'living pictures' was not just Scandinavian rural culture but the touristic spectator position at the 'threshold of the traditional and the modern' (p168). The common perception that traditional culture was rapidly disappearing, Sandberg argues, was closely associated with the changed availability of folk culture as a visual spectacle. Sandberg discusses a modern nostalgia in which older notions of escape into the past combined with the modern experience of mobility. The explicit pedagogy of the folk museums was oriented toward the preservation of a disappearing Scandinavian folk culture, yet spectators also found in them specifically modern pleasures of mobility - of being both 'here' and 'there' simultaneously.

The sense of a disappearing past, which characterised nineteenth-century folk collections throughout Europe, seems to have been particularly acute in Scandinavia. This is related to the rapid and relatively belated industrialisation of Scandinavia, and the specific geography of the Scandinavian countries which rendered some rural areas remote and inaccessible for most of the nineteenth century. When the mirror mazes installed in the Stockholm and Copenhagen Panoptika evoked the disorienting experience of urban traffic, such experiences were, in these cities, more fantasy than reality. Scandinavian museum audiences were positioned on the border between old and new worlds, characterised by an 'appetite for lost coherence' as well as 'a taste for distraction' (p12). Thus, Sandberg accounts for the fact that, while wax museums and folk museums were to be found elsewhere in Europe, the development of thoroughgoing mimetic and immersive displays was peculiar to Scandinavia. While museums characteristically remove an object's use-value, the folk museum attempted to 'resurrect' objects via the tableau, to 'consolidate' them into a coherent 'living picture'. Sandberg argues that the modern is characterised as much by its 'compensatory moves', its attempts to remake coherence, as it is by its production of incoherent sensation (p118). In folk museums, this leads to the replacement of tableaux by immersive displays in which the visitor is not a voyeur outside the scene, but enters and inhabits it.

Tableaux schooled visitors in modern spectating, teaching them proper and improper ways of engaging with the display. Sandberg shows that in the wax museums, as in early cinema, we find the satirical figure of the rube, the country bumpkin, as a lesson in how *not* to look. In the museum, as in early cinema, there is a 'powerful exclusionary logic' at work: the use of the rube



figure divides the sophisticated urbanite from the naïve farmer (p251). Yet, in the Scandinavian folk museums, where rural life is invested with national and romantic sentiment, a rube satire is not possible. In immersive displays, Sandberg suggests, all visitors are encouraged to be rubes, to mistake the space of representation for real and to enter into it - yet there are still complex protocols for spectating that have to be followed.

For me, the greatest virtue of Sandberg's study is the way it unhooks theories of modern spectatorship from their traditional objects (notably cinema and nineteenth century Paris). In doing so, it produces a nuanced and complex understanding of nineteenth-century modernity. If it is true that the recent turn toward studies of nineteenth-century media is prompted by recent changes in visual culture associated with digitisation, Sandberg takes this move to its logical conclusion. The return to an earlier mediatic diversity suggests other trajectories, other histories, in which the priority of media such as photography and cinema can no longer be assumed.

*Michelle Henning*