

# WALKING BACK TO HAPPINESS

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*Rowan Boyson*

Darrin McMahon, *Happiness: A History from the Greeks to the Present*, London, Allen Lane, 2006, 560pp, £25 hardback.

Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*, London, Penguin, 2005, 320pp, £8.99 paperback.

In the recent debates about happiness, a sharp-edged allegation has been heard. The charge is that the appearance of hundreds of low-brow self-help titles on getting happy, the science of ‘positive affect’, and the excitable re-branding of taxation as eudemonic economics, indicate nothing less than the moral crisis of modernity. A crisis of vapid hedonism, and a crisis of overweening entitlement: ‘we’ are obsessed with happiness and believe it to be our birthright. This particular strand of the backlash against the ‘culture of well-being’ claims that we need to stiffen our resolve and get ‘back’ to the things that really matter - war, politics and work. Alternatively, it grudgingly allows that happiness may be pursued, but only along the lines of the strictly anti-hedonistic, Aristotelian teleology of flourishing or successful activity: happiness purchased at the cost of pleasure.

The idea of the hedonistic ‘crisis’ of modern culture, and the longed-for moral remedy, may be traced to mid-twentieth-century intellectual ancestors on the political left and right. There is a particularly strong strain, however, in neo-conservative thought. This was manifest in Leo Strauss’s disdain for the lax mores of modern consumerist society as well as in more explicit commentary. For example, in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Daniel Bell influentially claimed that capitalism had become separated from its ‘transcendental Puritan ethic’, leaving only empty ‘hedonism,’ condemning the rhetoric of liberation and ‘rights’ that pervaded the ‘60s. Affirmative action, after all, was one of the key galvanizing irritants for the burgeoning neo-conservative movement, and seemed to be of a part with the ‘right’ to pleasure. ‘By the 1950s’, Bell wrote in 1976, ‘American culture had become primarily hedonistic, concerned with play, fun, display, and pleasure - and, typical of things in America, in a compulsive way [...] If psychoanalysis emerged just before World War I to deal with the repressions of Puritanism, the hedonistic age has its counterpart in sensitivity training, encounter groups, “joy therapy” ...’<sup>1</sup>

Something similar to this critique of hedonistic modernity is being touted three decades later. Perhaps the discussion of happiness necessarily invites an attitude towards the present as such: ‘happiness’ is linked to ideas of comparison, and progress. There may be a formal tendency of happiness

1. Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, London, Heinemann, 1976, pp70-72.

to be couched in nostalgic terms: Walter Benjamin described the ‘dialectics of happiness’ as involving on the one hand, the ‘first’ (unattainable) bliss, and on the other, the ‘elegiac’ dream of its recurrence.<sup>2</sup> But perhaps, more specifically, there is an anxiety about the Enlightenment, the period that decisively made happiness ‘a political factor’.<sup>3</sup> The Enlightenment’s thinking about happiness is at stake when Bell attacks modernity’s ‘megalomania of self-infinitezation’, ‘the refusal to accept limits’.<sup>4</sup> This contested legacy is also significant for the history and policies of happiness under review.

Darrin McMahon’s impressive and engaging *Happiness: A History* wants to trace the genealogy of this ‘contemporary obsession’ (pxii), which is said to be the ‘creed’ that happiness derives from human agency, and not fortune: ‘Arguably, there is no greater modern assumption than that it lies within our power to find happiness’ (p12). The book’s broad argument about the shift from a luck-based or tragic conception of happiness to a self-determining and universalizing notion, gives an inevitable prominence to the developments between Locke and the French Revolution. These Enlightenment chapters are precise in their attempt to work out what the eighteenth century took from the myriad earlier conceptions of happiness - a brilliantly sketched arc from Pompeiian phallic graffiti, to an ecstatic North African girl-martyr, to a depressive Martin Luther - and how it supplemented them: new quasi-scientific modes of analysis and the aspiration that happiness should apply to populations, not individuals or elites.

However, despite the sophistication of McMahon’s treatment of the *philosophes* and utilitarians, one of the quiet subtexts of *Happiness: a history* is the preconditional status of religious narratives for all ideas of happiness. So the spiritual ‘inward turn’ of Protestantism is essential to the Enlightenment idea that happiness is our responsibility:

In both its ‘sanctification of the ordinary,’ then, and its broader dictate to be ‘joyful in all things,’ the Reformation tended to moralize and consecrate mood. [...] In earthly despair we experienced a foretaste of the anguish of those eternally rejected by God. Joy and good feeling, conversely, could be treated as an indication of divine favor (p173).

G.K. Chesterton once remonstrated wittily that ‘the world is full of Christian ideas gone mad’, and McMahon suggests that we should think of our apparently ‘enlightened’ idea of happiness as just such a twisted example. But the connection is sometimes stretched (for instance, there is a philological liberty in translating ‘blessed’ as ‘happy’), and one wonders about unstated motivations behind the intertwining of religious and happiness narratives. His first monograph, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (2001) argued that opponents of ‘advances’ in civilisation were not ‘atavisms, or prisoners of the past’ but ‘endemic to modernity itself’, as modern as the *philosophes* they despised. The argument was clever and prescient for post 9/11 discourse (compare

2. Walter Benjamin ‘On the Image of Proust’, *Selected Writings, Volume 2, part 1, 1927-1930*, Rodney Livingstone and others (trans), Cambridge, MA, The Belknap Press, 1999, p239.

3. The phrase is Žižek’s, drawn from Saint-Just’s 1794 declaration to the National Convention that ‘Le bonheur est une idée neuve en Europe’. Slavoj Žižek, *For they know not what they do: Enjoyment as a political factor*, London and New York, Verso, 2002, p254.

4. Bell, *Contradictions*, op. cit., pp49-50.

for example John Gray's *Al-Qaeda: Or what it means to be Modern*), but the book also hints at regret about modern secular society. There is the same rueful attitude towards modernity in *Happiness: a history*, which perhaps accounts for the book's strange intellectual attenuation when it reaches the twentieth century. Following the tapestried treatment from the ancients up to Nietzsche and Freud's complexly pessimistic responses, the book suddenly closes down into the sharp dystopian vision of science fiction. Of *Brave New World*, McMahon writes:

Like our own, its citizens are distracted by an arts and entertainment industry that emphasizes entertainment at the expense of art; encouraged wherever possible to eradicate the unpleasant rather 'than learning to put up with it'; led along by the unfailing allure of prosperity, sexual satisfaction, and eternal youth; conditioned to abolish guilt and memory and regret. This is the happiness of Nietzsche's last men - a happiness freed of its final attachments to virtue, transcendence and self-development, reduced at long last to comfort and good feeling alone (p453).

This grim moral appraisal strikes an odd note after the witty and humane compass of the preceding chapters. McMahon locates the intensification of this happiness 'frenzy' in the year that Kennedy was assassinated and the yellow 'smiley face' was first devised by an advertising executive named Harvey R. Ball; a symbol that is somewhat hysterically said to 'compete for prominence in certain quarters with the Cross and the Star of David' (p463). In the designation of a mid '60s turning point there is a clear overlap with neo-conservative anxiety about the deleterious effect of feminism, civil rights and sexual liberation on 'Culture.' At the same time as we have given up 'the belief in meaning, in other ends' for 'feeling good' (p473), ends which are more or less explicitly religious, McMahon accuses twentieth-century philosophers of renegeing on the question of human happiness in favour of 'deconstruction and hermeneutics' (p475). Such a statement simply ignores the continued interest in the theme (particularly in a neo-Aristotelian *eudaimonia*) in analytic philosophy, viz A.L. Austin, G.E.M. Anscombe, Gilbert Ryle, Alasdair MacIntyre and Martha Nussbaum, not to mention the Frankfurt School's enigmatic comments on pleasure and happiness. McMahon's tirade refuses whether philosophy might have good reasons for rejecting 'happiness' from its remit (Kant, for example, gave explicit, political reasons for the separation of happiness from morals), and it denies interest in the factors which lead to philosophy being now only rarely what Pierre Hadot called 'a way of life'.

McMahon turns briefly to the recent sociological, economic and neuroscientific research on happiness in his last pages, where he finds that their discoveries recall much of what the history of philosophy already knows; he cautions scepticism about the politics of happiness and warns of a future where drugs will be used to enhance a happy lifestyle, not merely to cure 'needless mental pain' (p478). In closing with a critique of genetic

manipulation, in which humans ‘in their quest to live like gods’ risk ‘leaving a piece of their humanity behind’ (p479), McMahon endorses Bush’s bioethics adviser, the Strauss-influenced Leon Kass, who has condemned women’s use of the contraceptive pill as a refusal of the ‘teleological meaning’ of ovulation for the sake of ‘pleasure and convenience’.<sup>5</sup>

*Happiness: A history* is a divided book, which transmits its great delight and enthusiasm in the thinkers and activists who have taken happiness seriously, and is deeply attracted to the great Enlightenment imperative to relieve the pain of others; on the other hand it transfixes its reader with a nightmare of a frivolous, hedonistic (American) society, saturated in advertising and drugs. The question remains as to whether this is in any way a convincing image of modernity. Against this purportedly happiness-crazy culture, we might set abstinence campaigns, the prohibition of gay marriage, and the longest working hours in the West, as well as the cataclysmic vision of the neo-conservative war against terror, towards which the critique of hedonism may make an obscure yet noteworthy contribution.

Richard Layard’s highly successful *Happiness: Lessons from a new science* is not mentioned by McMahon in his closing discussion of recent intellectual developments, but it cites some of the same international surveys, and had it come out earlier presumably would be considered by McMahon as another curious but unedifying contribution to an eternal *philosophical* conundrum. Layard’s book originated as a set of lectures delivered at the LSE in 2003, though many of the key assertions appeared some twenty-five years back in a considerably drier, technical essay.<sup>6</sup> With the addition of droll cartoons and literary quotations the *Happiness* book is designed to chime with a new popular appetite for zany, psychologised economics (compare *The Tipping Point* and *Freakonomics*). The media now often dubs Layard ‘Government happiness tzar’; he advises the government on mental health, in particular the expansion of counselling and cognitive behavioural therapy. Along with other British and American academics including Andrew Oswald, David Blanchflower, Paul Dolan and the Nobel-prize-winning Daniel Kahnemann, Layard contributes to a fusion of economics, psychology and neuroscience in which consists the ‘new science’ of his title.

The scientific coherence of this research and policy programme has been contested, but not so much as Layard’s deployment of a simple utilitarian or hedonistic definition of happiness (‘feeling good - enjoying life and wanting the feeling to be maintained’, p12) and his corollary, shared with Bentham, that happiness is a unitary, universal and measurable phenomenon. Layard is frank about his desire to revive utilitarian thought. He claims that the propitious difference today is an empirical foundation that the eighteenth century could only have dreamed of. This science has two main planks: one, the neuroscience of positive affect, which involves tests like brain scans of people shown ‘nice’ and ‘unpleasant’ images (normal and ‘deformed’ babies); and large datasets now running back some 30 years, of which the most important for happiness studies are the surveys on life satisfaction. The

5. Leon Kass, ‘The End of Courtship’, *The Public Interest*, 126, 39-63 (Winter 1997): 45.

6. Richard Layard, ‘Human Satisfaction and Public Policy’, *The Economic Journal*, 90 (December 1980): 737-50. The inadequacy of income as a measure of well-being has been asserted by economists and political philosophers since at least the 1970s, as in for example Amartya Sen’s ‘capabilities’ approach.

question asked in the Eurobarometer survey, 'Taking all things together, how would you say things are these days - would you say you're very happy, fairly happy, or not too happy these days?', leads to Layard's weirdly Larkinesque observation that in Britain, 'happiness has been static since 1975' (p29). For Layard, such a discovery shows neither that human emotional experience exhibits a certain historical continuity; nor that a Eurobarometer survey is a rather blunt instrument; rather, it shows the need for immediate intellectual and practical action. 'We need a revolution in academia, with every social science attempting to understand the causes of happiness. We also need a revolution in government' (p145-6).

What Layard terms a 'paradox' and a 'devastating fact' (p4) is that unprecedented economic growth has not led to an unprecedented happiness. In any society, richer people are 'substantially happier' than poorer - according to their own self-reports. But richer countries are *not* substantially happier than poorer ones, once a baseline income has been assured. This is estimated at \$20,000 income per head per annum - up to that point, money can make a difference to how good you feel; but after that point we start counting our blessings relatively instead of absolutely. The problem emerges from our human tendency towards envy and comparison: rather a small but solitary pay rise than a universal large one. Furthermore, we suffer from habituation or 'addiction' to improvements in our living standards.

As with McMahon's book, the happiness philosophy in *Lessons from a new science* seems inexorably to lead to modern society's failings. Layard suggests that alongside psychological status issues, cultural and spiritual factors diminish our ability to enjoy our wealth and health. The 'fundamental problem' is 'a lack of common feeling between people' (p163) and the tendency towards 'rampant individualism' (p91) consequent upon the loss of faith and political grand narratives; but other rogue agents include new gender roles ('in many ways liberating. But [...] many men felt they got less attention than before from their wives', p83), divorce, television, and crime. This leads at times to banal advice: 'Better to seek the beauty within than to have an affair' (p235).

As compensating mechanisms, a set of supposedly 'counter-intuitive' recommendations is offered which actually strikingly resemble the European social-democratic model. High taxation is reconceived as a tax on the 'pollution' that a high earner causes by pushing other people down in the relative income stakes. Economic inequality needs to be reduced, because it makes people particularly unhappy, and furthermore the same amount of money actually matters more to a poor person than to a rich one. Performance-related pay does not increase productivity but only miserable competitiveness; family-friendly policies are required to improve family life. Job stability is more important than 'flexibility', and geographical mobility, beloved of free market economists, needs to be recognized as a threat to family life and crime rates. Resources should be concentrated on treating mental illness, as it causes more 'misery' to more people than anything else, as well as on alleviating poverty in

the Third World because the very poor are very 'unhappy'. Children should be educated in happiness and protected from advertising.

There is nothing greatly to object to in the main proposals. But these are clearly not the only conclusions that might be drawn from the statistics presented. One discomfiting policy implication is floated briefly: immigration is problematic, Layard suggests, because native residents, he claims, gain less happiness than immigrants from the exchange of skills, culture, and earnings. But if the geographical circle around the felicitic 'greatest number' is to be drawn exclusively along Britain's borders, on what utilitarian basis should we concern ourselves with the happiness of the Third World's 'very poor'? (The same dilemma faced the instinctively anti-colonialist Bentham.) Likewise, if as the 'new science' has shown, statistically significant numbers of Texan women claim that commuting is their least happy and sex their most happy part of the day, public policy should prioritize the services of chauffeurs and escorts; and given the claim that there is a positive correlation between happiness and both being married and having faith, introduce legislation on divorce and religious observance.

However, these incongruous implications provide only a surface objection to *Lessons from a new science*, as do criticisms of the economic reasoning that note that the taxation shifts Layard proposes are too moderate to have any 'happiness' impact. More serious concerns have been raised over the stringently anti-psychoanalytic tone of the book ("There is no difference between what people think they feel and what they "really" feel', p20). Happiness is portrayed as an evolutionary survival factor, with a handy push-pull mechanism that does not brook Freud's insights into our perverse chasing of what we *don't* like, including things that make us unhappy. It is surprising to discover that Layard's father was the Jungian analyst John Layard, author of several works on mythology and dreams.<sup>7</sup> Despite the economist son's passionate calls for renewed attention to, and funding for, mental health services, he evinces a profound distrust of the possibility of any unconscious dimension to happiness.

The widespread and yet most serious philosophical objection has been to the idea that happiness can be summarized as 'feeling good.' To many this seems reductive, normative and illiberal; many would share the objections of the neo-conservatives in thinking that the vision of a government that legislates for happiness is purely nightmarish. Layard argues that we need some ultimate goal for society and that happiness must be that goal, because of its self-evident goodness and its consistent historical valuation; and he argues that to 'justify our goals by the way people feel' is the only way to avoid 'paternalism' (p124, p113). If the alternative is neo-conservative outrage at modernity's vacuous hedonism, one should be cautious about pillorying the egalitarian Enlightenment materialism of 'feeling good', however wrapped up today in New Labour (and now, new Conservative) *sententiae*, and however ideologically adaptable a politics of 'well-being' may appear. As Walter Benjamin put it in his analysis of Proust, the 'time-tested, comfortable

7. John Layard, *The Stone Men of Malekula*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1942 and *The Lady of the Hare*, London, Faber and Faber, 1944.

8. Benjamin,  
'Proust', op. cit.,  
p239.

perspective of resignation, heroism, asceticism' on the part of the 'model pupils of life' is exactly what is troubled by the 'heart-stopping, explosive will to happiness' that 'shone from his eyes'.<sup>8</sup> The intellectual challenge now is to formulate ways of thinking about happiness that are as 'explosive' as Benjamin proposed.

## RESISTING SOPHISTRY

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*Vincent Lloyd*

Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2007; 144pp, £11.95 hardback.

Jacqueline Rose, *The Last Resistance*, London, Verso, 2007; 256pp, £16.99 hardback.

Jacqueline Rose and Talal Asad are established and influential scholars who think critically about the Middle East. Although Rose is a literature scholar with an interest in psychoanalysis while Asad, an anthropologist by training, is interested in social and political theory, their new books address overlapping issues and are motivated by similar political concerns. Subtle, sophisticated, and imaginative, these two interventions have strikingly different approaches to theorizing religion and politics. Asad's *Genealogies of Religion* (1993) and *Formations of the Secular* (2003) began a radical reformulation of the concept of agency, a project extended recently by scholars such as Amy Hollywood and Saba Mahmood. Instead of taking agency to involve actions which resist social norms, Asad conceived of agency as involving how an individual inhabits social norms. For example, Asad showed how the apparently restrictive practices of medieval Christian monks could be understood as involving the exercise of agency through their creative use of disciplinary practices - even though the monks did not resist social norms (Mahmood advances an analogous argument with regard to Muslim women who wear headscarves).

In contrast, Rose's *The Last Resistance* is an attempt to retrieve resistance as a key theoretical concept. According to Rose, power functions by concealing resistance; the task of the critic is to expose sites of resistance. Collapsed into such a slogan, Rose's proposal sounds rather passé. But through varied engagements with political, literary, psychoanalytic, and critical texts, Rose presents a robust, dynamic case for the centrality of resistance and for its particular relevance in light of the present political circumstances in the Middle East. Indeed, what is so impressive - and effective - about Rose's presentation is the way that she treats psychoanalysis, politics, criticism, and literature as part of a single plane on which sites of resistance appear. For example, in the title chapter, she interweaves discussion of Freud's clinical writings with discussion of biographical details of Freud's life, Freud's correspondence with Arnold Zweig, Zweig's ambivalent feelings about Zionism, and Zweig's own literary works. She explores the workings of resistance in each, and tracks how sites of resistance mutate and metastasize.

For Rose, literature itself is a form of resistance. She exhibits this in an essay on the militant Zionist Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky. Known for his



undisguised commitment to violent struggle on behalf of a Jewish homeland, Jabotinsky's literary works contain an ambivalence that never surfaced in his public persona. While in public life Jabotinsky was asserting that Jews would become the 'masters' of 'our own Palestine', in one of his novels he wrote sympathetically of the possibility for the 'good-natured fraternization of nationalities' (pp104-5). The critic's task, both identified and performed by Rose, is to point out how Jabotinsky's literary works resist the Israeli Right's appropriation of him as a symbol for extremist Zionism. At the same time, literature served as a site of resistance in Jabotinsky the man, a point of fracture in the always already fractured human psyche. The theme of resistance unites the disparate essays and reviews collected in *The Last Resistance*, and it appears in a variety of forms. Rereading Freud, Rose highlights this sometimes latent but always crucial theme in his work (her discussion of *Mass Psychology* together with *Moses* is particularly illuminating). On another level, Rose resists an image of Israel projected by the Israeli Right by highlighting a counter-tradition of distinguished Israeli writers such as David Grossman and Shulamith Hareven who resist morally problematic Israeli policies. On yet another level, Rose's prose itself performs resistance. The connection between sentences and paragraphs is always loose, never quite logical - but also never alogical. The reader is forced to work her text into something sensible, but every attempt at making sense is complicated by her next line, her next passage. This writing strategy works marvellously when Rose has the discipline to stay on topic; it becomes frustrating when she introduces too much too fast (for example, she discusses Coetzee, transcendence, ageing, 9/11 videos, and mercy - all in the last two pages of an essay on evil).

Does Rose's rejuvenated concept of resistance put her in conflict with Asad? It seems as though Asad objected to a different, or at least narrower, conception of resistance when he reformulated the question of agency. He would endorse resistance to social closure just as much as Rose; it is valorisation of individual resistance to social norms that he urges us to reconsider. Rose makes clear that, although she appeals to the French Resistance and to other resistance movements, her paradigm of resistance is 'the mind at war with itself' (p21). She urges us to switch from examining 'resistance to' to examining 'resistance of' - where the object of the preposition extends from the individual unconscious to the collective unconscious (p29). However, one wonders whether the allergy Asad and his followers have to the term 'resistance' might still lead them to keep Rose's work at arm's length. Perhaps we can pursue this question by turning to an issue that both Asad and Rose address, suicide bombings. Rose wonders why suicide bombings create such horror. It cannot simply be that they cause civilian casualties, for Allied firebombing of Japan and Germany did this without resulting in the same sort of horror. Rose provocatively suggests that the horror that suicide bombings cause results from the 'intimacy between bomber and her or his victims' - a 'passionate identification', a 'deadly embrace' (p127). In a nation turned into a fortress, such as Israel, to imagine being in physical proximity to that which has been excluded, the Palestinian bomber, creates

horror. In other words, the horror at suicide bombing is caused by resistance, the resistance exposed in the intimate meeting of the 'possessor of force' who 'seems to walk through a non-resistant element' with the resistance produced but hidden, embodied in the suicide bomber (pvii, citing Simone Weil).

In line with his earlier work, in *On Suicide Bombing* Asad rejects explanations of suicide bombing that try to get at the interior of the bomber's mind: he rejects 'fantasies of accessibility' (p41). But he goes further: he also considers and rejects sociological, theological, and political explanations. For example, he rejects Ivan Strenski's theory that suicide bombing represents a sanctifying gift because Asad argues that this theory is based on a Christian model, and the Arabic word for gift is never used in connection with the word for sacrifice (Asad further suggests that Strenski's theory portrays suicide bombers as 'underdeveloped' and 'premodern'). All in all, 'the social scientist, novelist, and filmmaker endow the dead terrorist with the motives of the living' - the dead terrorist, of course, cannot speak for herself (p45). This does not mean that suicide bombing is an absolutely unique phenomenon, according to Asad. Rather, motives are always opaque and contestable; to state them is to acquiesce to the 'typologies of action that are conventionally recognized' (p64). Moreover, the very question of the motive of suicide bombing presumes that there is an 'essence' to suicide bombing, a premise which Asad rejects. Instead of focusing on motive, Asad focuses on effect (here he directly comments on an earlier version of material from *The Last Resistance*). Asad investigates horror and suicide in the work of Mary Douglas and Georges Bataille, in the Bible, in the experiences of Vietnam veterans, and in an Israeli account of a suicide attack. He concludes, with particular reference to Christ's 'suicide', that 'in Christian civilization, the gift of life for humanity is possible only through a suicidal death' (p86). Encountering Muslim suicide bombers, we (Westerners) are reminded of 'the limitless pursuit of freedom' involved in suicide, exemplified by Christ and repeated through the history of the Christian West but forgotten in secular modernity (p91). It is a horrifying reminder, one that reveals a tension within secular modernity: what Rose would call resistance.

*On Suicide Bombing* is a wide-ranging, though brief, exploration of how secular modernity deals with Islam, with killing, and with death. Asad labours to undermine the 'clash of civilizations' thesis. To do this, his strategy - rather predictably - is to demonstrate how Muslim and European Christian civilizations have interpenetrated for centuries: 'The histories of Europe and Islam cannot be completely separated' (p10). Further, Asad argues that '*jihad*' and 'Crusade' are not parallel concepts. He provides a history of the term '*jihad*', showing how it is not a central theme of Islam (as some Western commentators claim), how the Arabic adjective for 'holy' is never applied to 'war', how originally *jihad* meant the defence of Muslim lands to be undertaken by only a few, and how Muslims fought against other Muslims - all in one brisk paragraph. Further, Asad attempts to undermine Michael Walzer's 'just war' theory, taking it as symptomatic of the contradictions involved in the secular modern view of killing and death (although each human being is supposed to be of equal value, killing some humans is more

important than killing others; while human life is supposed to be highly valued, killing human life is justified if it is deemed necessary to defend a way of life). He shows how Walzer takes advantage of 'emergency ethics' to justify the evils committed by a state (when its way of life is threatened) while still condemning the evils of individuals (when their way of life is threatened). He concludes that Walzer and theorists like him use two different sets of rules: acts of violence by states are evaluated according to their legality while acts of violence by individuals are evaluated by the feelings of vulnerability and fear that they create.

Rose and Asad share the same political goals and overlapping subject matter, but their rhetoric, their means of persuasion, differs sharply. Rose invokes the authority of psychoanalytic theory but otherwise deals with concrete historical events and literary texts. Asad attempts to make conceptual and historical arguments, for example about the essential connection between liberalism, modern subjectivity, and violence. But, disconcertingly, Asad's brisk etymologies and history lessons coupled with the sweeping claims they are supposed to support often feel like they belong in a newspaper editorial rather than an academic monograph. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates presents two speeches superior to a speech made by Lysias, a sophist. In his first speech, Socrates rebuts Lysias' arguments in an orderly and seemingly logical manner - although, on close examination, the logic is primarily facade. Disclaiming his first speech, Socrates is inspired by the gods to use mythical imagery in his second speech, imagining the soul as a charioteer guiding a good horse and a bad horse; imagining the soul sprouting wings; and imagining a 10,000 years cycle of reincarnation. Socrates and Phaedrus agree that the second speech is far more persuasive than the first.

Perhaps we can think of Rose's appeal to the psychoanalytic machinery of resistance as the sort of mythology to which Socrates appeals in his second speech. Rose leaves most of this machinery, such as the relation of resistance to the superego on both an individual and social level (as she explains in her title essay, she is concerned with the 'last' of four types of resistance that Freud enumerates), under the surface through much of her text. But the imaginative leap that she guides the reader on, allowing her to consider literature, politics, and criticism as folds of the same plane, requires commitment to a certain mythology. This is what gives Rose's text its persuasive force - in contrast to Asad's quasi-systematic quasi-argumentation which struggles to do more than reverse the sophistry it opposes (like Socrates' first speech, or the documentaries of Michael Moore). Indeed, Asad concedes that what he has to say 'is fairly familiar stuff', and he argues that it must be repeated because of the Western media obsession 'with the ruthlessness of jihadists and the dangers of an unreformed Islam' (p95). Certainly, both Asad's rhetoric and Rose's rhetoric have a role to play. Socrates' first speech reinforced a shared opinion when it was under threat from the sophists. His second speech drew on mythology to gain leverage over the terms of ordinary debate. For both Asad and Rose, the task is to oppose - to resist - the sophistry which deems some lives worthier than others, which fortifies the powerful and demeans the weak.

## CINEMATIC HAT TRICKS

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*Janet Harbord*

Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables*, translated by Emiliano Battista, Oxford and New York, Berg, 2006; 196pp, £16.99 paperback.

Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, London, Reaktion Books, 2006; 216pp, £14.95 paperback.

Tom Conley, *Cartographic Cinema*, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 2007; 264pp, \$25.00 paperback.

‘I do not think that the notions of modernity and the avant-garde have been very enlightening when it comes to thinking about the new forms of art that have emerged since the last century’, remarks Rancière in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, a book that comes before *Film Fables*. When *Film Fables* then opens with a citation from Jean Epstein, both a modernist and a member of the cinematic avant-garde, a confrontation is set in place. ‘Cinema is true. The story is a lie’, ends the quotation, dismissing the Aristotelian legacy dear to Rancière. Epstein, we might feel, is Rancière’s stooge, articulating the dream of early cinema as a medium that broke decisively with other art forms, particularly the drama of narrative progression. In Epstein’s version, cinema is distinguished by the passive mechanical eye of the camera, revealing to us the intensity of the many micro-movements that sustain life, without false structure, action and dénouement. The fact that cinema did not fulfil such expectations, that it was to become rapidly re-encoded through an Aristotelian legacy, is for Rancière, the gift of cinema’s last century.

The framework of *Film Fables* takes us away from a concern with medium specificity, with the purity of forms and a concern to define cinema against other art forms. It takes us towards a model of cinema where the effects of other art forms cut across its plane. Here, literature as much as painting and theatre influence the coming into being of cinema. With a nod to Heidegger, cinema’s presence cannot be deduced from its material, and certainly not from its technological apparatus. And we have not finished with Epstein yet. Rancière returns to the lengthy citation that opens the prologue to point out that Epstein’s appeal to sensual details is not a reverie of his imagination, but extracted from a filmed melodrama. Thus the drive for a cinematic purity that Epstein exemplifies is derived from a dramatic source, a de-figuration that mixes with rather than situates a break from traditions of storytelling. Epstein’s fable is a thwarted fable precisely because it creates a hybrid where it intends to locate purity. The note of *Film Fables* is

sounded here, ‘This particular penchant for making a fable with another is not a fad of the period, but a constitutive fact of the cinema as experience, art, and idea of art’ (p5).

This opposition between the arts of storytelling (*muthos*) and the arts of the sensible and the spectacle (*opsis*), is an overworked paradigm for film theory, familiar as the dual legacies of Lumière and Méliès respectively. Rancière shows us both the fallibility of the binary, and its utility. If cinema cannot be reduced to this opposition, it is none the less a ‘positive contradiction’, an antagonism that characterises cinema’s internal movement of turning and thwarting, dependent on a mutual interference of opposites. Where, for example, the drive of the story appears to carry us headlong towards a conclusion, the optical detail of the image enters as an estrangement, a hesitation within the path of action. Conversely, details of a sensible, affectual experience of the world curiously turn to become signs of suspense, producing moments where the innocent eye of the camera appears to be more knowing than we imagine. With a loosely conceived chronology, *Film Fables* takes us through a century of cinema to reveal the mixing of film with theatre (Murnau), television (Fritz Lang), the tradition of romantic intimacy without familiarity (Ray), and the documents of history (Marker). The final dénouement of the book is a reading of Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. The project of re-writing a century of cinema with fragments compiled from the archive, is a refabulation of cinema’s fables, an exemplary instance of cinema’s own creative thwarting. For where *Histoire(s) du cinéma* reveals cinema’s failure to make the century present to itself, it introduces a new immanence to the images torn from their context. In this sense, every failure is redeemed as a new possibility. If cinema is guilty of not realising its power to reorder the world, it is this same innocence that has characterised its open anticipation of a future.

We might expect from a book entitled *Film Fables*, an analytical working over of the main concept. This is not the case. *Film Fables* is a work that leaves us to gather the meaning of the fable from the numerous textual readings where cinematic purity falters. In these readings, Rancière undoubtedly pulls rabbits from hats, but rabbits do not specify the nature of fables, they merely appear in them. In order to grasp the foundations of this project of fabulation, it is necessary to look to Rancière’s other works where the fable is given greater play. In *Aesthetics and Politics*, it is clear that we cannot understand the significance of the fable, or its vexed relation to modernism, unless we take into account earlier aesthetic regimes of Plato’s ethics, and Aristotle’s coupling of poieis-mimesis. It is Aristotle’s representative (mimetic) regime in particular that Rancière reads as necessarily contemporaneous with the advent of cinema. The definition of mimesis is not that of a fabricated resemblance to the world in the artwork. It is instead a pragmatic principle that extracts the particular form of artworks that are named imitations, establishing rules that define the substance rather than the essence of artistic products. With the establishment of normative rules of imitation, art production becomes

separate from, but set in relation to, other occupations. In the establishing of this related autonomy, art is rendered visible. The problem, for Rancière, with the modernist (aesthetic) rupture is its dissolution of the boundaries and thus the visibility of art. Art is at once autonomous, defined as a sensibility, and indistinguishable from other spheres of life that have become the material of its forms. Finally, the necessity of the fable to cinema is to contradict this logic of autonomy and invisibility, to draw cinema fighting into the realm of visible relations of production.

A retrospective reading of cinema as the site of contradictory impulses also characterises Laura Mulvey's *Death 24x a Second*. But where Rancière places cinema against a background of aesthetic regimes that predate it, Mulvey attends to the material contradictions of cinema as, primarily, a photographic form, and leads from here to a series of suggestive arguments of how such contradictions have been reworked in the wake of digital technology. Critical to this conceptualisation of cinema is the relation of the image to the index, the idea of the inscription of light upon a surface that appeared to absorb a ghostly trace of the 'what has been'. As an animated form, cinema at once promised a more potent ghosting than the photograph, yet more significantly, the repressed foundation of stillness returns to haunt cinema. The digital has a large part to play here. The loss of an indexical relation between image and object rewrites this once fundamental condition of cinema, so that the contemporary meaning of the history of cinema changes. As we view celluloid through the medium of the digital, the past is not what it seemed but is prized open by this technology of estrangement. The mechanism in operation here is Freud's *nachträglichkeit* (deferred action). For what is described is a sense of a dormant history, or of history as the repository of (potentially traumatic) experience that may be realized by a later event. This is the model that Mulvey exercises to think the complex relations of cinema to time.

In many ways Mulvey's account is itself less like a narrative film and more like a photographic exposure, building in detail here, outlining a contour of argument there. Against a sketched background of failed political projects, that of communism and the aesthetic project of political modernism, a spectator, a DVD player, and a remote control are insistently foregrounded. The notion of delayed cinema takes focus as a series of enactments on the text: a slowing of speed, a halting of the image, a repetitious viewing of selected scenes. The 'radical' exposure of film's materiality is no longer the provenance of the filmmaker but the viewer; yet this activity lacks an assured outcome. Here is a different kind of exposure as the book opens out the possibilities of what might be involved, psychically, in the viewing of delayed cinema. Replaying and pausing a sequence from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, where Marilyn Monroe dances, Mulvey has this to say:

In addition to the artificial, stylized persona, evocative of the beautiful automaton, her gestures are orchestrated around moments of pose. In this particular fragment, played to camera, she pulls up her shoulder strap in

a performance of an almost slutish disorder of dress that is completely at odds with the mechanical precision of this and each gesture. Even though the gesture was so self-consciously produced, it has, for me, something of Barthes's punctum, and I found myself returning over and again to these few seconds of film (p172).

The moment replayed demonstrates how in this activity the narrative drive is suspended and the appeal of identification weakened. Yet the analysis of a dance routine that disturbs a viewing routine pushes further into an exposure of engagement. The commentary slides from a question of what it is that we *can* do with film, towards the more exposing question, what is it that we *want* to do in delaying film? A delayed cinema allows us, retrospectively, to see what we have failed to notice before, but it also opens the possibilities of a fetishistic and compulsive re-assembly of the film.

*Death 24x a second* requires us to think about what it means to go back, to return. It asks this question of our relation to photography, to film and to cinematic theory. It exposes the pathologies involved in going back as a possessive voyeurism determined to see and to 'know', or a fetishistic desire to collect and re-order. Mulvey leaves us, however, with an ambivalence about the meaning of return that derives from Freud. In 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', where Freud elaborates his theory of the death drive, there is the description of a double movement, or splitting of the drive. One part of it rushes forward towards its final goal of stasis (death), overcoming the obstacles in its path, whilst the other part wants to return to the beginning. The conservative framing of this movement is that the desire is to return to a state of inertia, the inanimate state of death. Yet there is a possible reading of this return as a deferral in reaching the end, a desire to repeat as starting over again. Whilst this description is analogous to narrative possibilities in film, it is also a description in which we have to pause to consider the meaning of repetition. For repetition is not necessarily the pathological return to what is known, but the deferral of a final goal. Mulvey leaves in the air the possibility that to go back is to travel in the opposite direction from death.

In *Cartographic Cinema*, Tom Conley brings space into a discussion of cinematic form and time through a consideration of the place of maps and the cartographic impulse in film. Again, loosely arranged in chronological order, the text begins with early French cinema, *Paris qui dort*, and ends with epic American-global cinema in a reading of *Gladiator*. The emphasis on mapping as an activity produces space as a malleable property, brought into being to accentuate power and control, or conversely to suggest future tenderness and hope. Our attention is drawn to surfaces and inscription, to an analogy of maps and films that redresses the documentary framing of space as travelogue. Here, space is affectual, a landscape saturated with emotion that resonates, for example in the cinema of Truffaut. In the reading of *Les 400 coups*, the over-presence of maps in the classroom signals a profound alienation from a colonial past. Fleeing the confines of the schoolroom, and

the imposed historical mapping of his future, the boy ultimately creates his own cartography, ending with the limit, or potential openness, of the shoreline.

*Cartographic Cinema* is persuasive in its arguments that maps and cinema have something in common in the training of attention and in matters of emotional orientation. The working through of that relation, however, is theoretically overwhelmed by a textual analysis of key scenes that borders on the baroque. In a book attentive to the skills and manipulations of cartography, the reader can find herself intellectually at sea, struggling to follow Conley's method of 'interwoven connections'. Perhaps the most perplexing element of this account is the lack of engagement with other work in this area, in particular Giuliana Bruno's *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map* and *Atlas of Emotion: journeys in art, architecture and film*. A dialogue with Bruno's work on affectual space may have raised the stakes for thinking the importance of a filmic cartography, yet her latter book receives only a cursory mention in the conclusion.

In each of these books a history of cinema is replayed through a particular framework of revision. In Rancière, it is a framework of contradiction between narrative and image that invokes the philosophical past. In the accounts of Mulvey and Conley, there is a greater sense of recent transformations to cinema driving the project. In Mulvey, the dialectic of stillness and movement draws attention to changes in viewing technologies, and in Conley the planes of a projective apparatus lead us metaphorically to ponder the demise of the projective apparatus. The question of what cinema was, it appears, can never be finalized. It has to go on being asked because cinema keeps catching up with us. In these different versions of cinema, there are moments of convergence rather than agreement, cross-referencing where maps and memories, as they are set down, collide. A particularly interesting convergence appears with work of Rossellini, which merits a chapter in each. Rancière moves with characteristic force across six of Rossellini's films, dispelling Bazin's notion of the films as a patient search for the secret of beings and things, and Deleuze's reading of this cinema as disconnected spaces of pure optical and sound images. For Rancière, this is a cinema of 'the pure collision of extremes', a cinema that thwarts its own impetus: idolatory butts up against asceticism, script against improvisation, history against the year zero, explanation against the void of non-meaning. Realism is most thoroughly antagonised by gesture, the tendency of the image to flatten out into arabesque; the most remarkable example being the implausible death of Pina, in *Rome, Open City*. Rancière gives this sequence a poetic quality of its own in the painterly description of the woman as she 'crashes on the white street like a great bird' (p127).

Where Rancière discovers the narrative drive broken down by the curious registration of a gestural image, Mulvey locates in Rossellini moments of suspension ('delay'), where the uncanny return of the past intervenes. In a reading of *Journey to Italy*, the past is a territory laid bare in the ruins of Pompeii. The past volcanically erupts, but the emphasis here is the gendered



nature of response: whilst Katherine inhabits the suspended moments of stillness, Alex moves on. Refusing the tenets of 'realism', Mulvey argues that this dialectic alternates fiction and documentary, producing an uncanny slippage between the stuff of film and the moments where performance tails off into a zone of uncertainty. In working the distance between the present reading and the past moment of production, this slippage appears at the boundary of character and actor; biographical accounts of the production suggest that the actors were lost and without a script in this landscape. In Conley's reading of *Rome, open city* (where Rancière's reading is woven into the text), he finds disjunction in the spatial opening of planes through the technique of the wipe. In this movement between images, Rossellini shifts the frame from left to right, cutting against the grain of reading. As one image moves into the frame of another, a curious doubling occurs. A character appears to be looking onto another scene, seeing more than one plane and appearing in more than one place. Conley, in an echo of Mulvey's Freudian sensibility, describes the effect as an 'uncanny violence' where we are suspended between here and there, depth and surface. It is a trope that might stand for the reading of these accounts of cinema history together, as the same image of a film splits into various surfaces and particles. Such is the appeal of the cinematic past where, in the vaults of film history, we are also ghosts to each other.

## BOOKNOTES

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Michel Feher with Gaëlle Krikorian and Yates McKee (eds),  
*Nongovernmental Politics*, New York, Zone Books, 2007; 693pp, £24.95  
paperback

*Nongovernmental Politics* brings together an impressive collection of academics, researchers and activists in an exploration of the ways in which non-governmental organisations situate, justify and promote their activities. This heterogeneous mix of critical essays, profiles and interviews includes contributions from internationally recognised organisations such as the American Civil Liberties Union, Médecins Sans Frontières and the Third World Network as well as many smaller organisations such as the environmentalist Haburas Foundation in Timor; the Islamic Coordination Council in Peshawar and the evangelical Voice of the Martyrs in the United States of America. The book is broken up into four parts: 'Motives', which looks at the issues which inspire non-governmental activities; 'Ways', which examines the means by which activists articulate those issues; and 'Sites', which focuses on the spaces in which many of these articulations take place. The final section 'Registers', considers various secular and religious notions of society.

In an attempt to bind these diverse and disparate contributions editor Michel Feher refers to Foucault's lecture 'Qu'est-ce que c'est la critique?' and maintains that 'what these activists all have in common is ... a shared determination not to be governed thusly' (p14). Perhaps not surprisingly Foucault's work runs both explicitly and implicitly through many of the contributions in *Nongovernmental Politics* and contributes greatly to the book's internal structure and coherence. However as Ian Robinson points out – in response to Feher's questions on 'stakeholder activism' – such broad definitions make it all but 'impossible to do justice to the full range of possibilities encompassed by the concept' (p200). As a consequence of the admirable but problematic desire to include all political activity 'in which the governed as such are involved' (p13) *Nongovernmental Politics* occasionally appears a little unwieldy and muffled in its approach.

Fortunately, while Michel Feher is faced with the unenviable task of orchestrating the almost overwhelming complexities of nongovernmental politics into a cohesive and coherent whole, individual commentators are free to focus solely on 'the pieces of this vast mosaic that [they] know best' (p200). As a result, the profiles of NGOs are informative and the critical essays are both rigorous and revealing. However it is the interviewees' first hand experience of the complex power relations between non-governmental organisations and state authorities, combined with their self-reflexive analysis of the difficult gaps between discourses which provide the most consistent

and illuminating source of information. Thus *Nongovernmental Politics*' most substantial contribution to the field lies in the detailed and knowledgeable accounts offered by the non-governmental activists themselves.

*Pollyanna Ruiz*

Wendy Wheeler, *The Whole Creature: Complexity, Biosemiotics and the Evolution of Culture*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 2006; 192pp, £17.99 paperback.

Wendy Wheeler's *The Whole Creature* offers a timely alternative to the culturalism that has long dominated many forms of cultural studies. Her alternative is developed via the notion that everything in human affairs is, from beginning to end, a matter of *biosemiosis*. Biosemiosis, and its corresponding discipline, biosemiotics, build on the idea that the universe is not only 'perfused with signs' (as Charles Sanders Peirce would put it), but that all life is a matter of an open, and on-going process of evolution — we might say, a process of evolutionary semiosis, or of semiotic evolution.

If the critique of biologism forms a significant part of one's critical common sense, this may sound like heresy. But Wheeler makes a compelling case that this approach can be employed not just to provide a rich and critical account of the nature of human flourishing, but also a comprehensive critique of both genetic, and economic determinisms. Wheeler is well aware, and critical of the reductionist character of Darwinian and Neo-Darwinian accounts of evolution. Her own understanding of evolution draws on 'complexity views of nature' that are capable of explaining how 'autopoietic' (i.e. self-determining) organisms are subjected to the 'drift' of evolution over time. Such accounts suggest that, in the evolutionary process, a first order coupling between the organism and its environment remains and persists in the second order development of multi-cellular life forms as cells combine and evolve new morphologies.

As Wheeler puts it, 'Not only has the inheritance of acquired characteristics been shown to be possible, but such epigenetic inheritance indicates our inseparable lived relation to our environment, including our cultural environment' (p14). In keeping with this view, and unlike those who would draw a neat line to separate *Homo symbolicus* from the rest of the universe, Wheeler suggests that semiotics - in the form of both explicit, but also of tacit signs - 'is built into nature, and we are the animals in whom it has most richly flourished, and who have moved from what we call nature to what we call culture - though they are differences only of gradation in the direction of complexity and conceptual abstraction' (p153). Humans, in this sense, are the creatures with the most complex semiotics, but also with what Jesper Hoffmeyer describes as the greatest 'semiotic freedom'.

This account of the book might make it seem to locate the book firmly in 'science studies'. However, Wheeler is true to the title of her book in that she considers a variety of problems involving the relation between rationality and the 'rest' of the creature. These include a critique of rationalism in the light of

a biosemiotic understanding of the relationship between mind, embodiment and memory; an account, by way of the work of Michael Polanyi, of the 'passionate structure of tacit knowledge' and its intriguing relationship to the ways that we might know without meaning to know; and an analysis, via the work of Michael Marmot, of the relationship between human health and the environment. In her own words, Wheeler sets out to investigate 'the ways in which both cultural (i.e. overwhelmingly conventional) and natural signs (e.g. the array of signs of human sociality itself) can be written on bodies in the form of natural signs (disease in this case) (p111). Far from concluding that health is predetermined by genetic factors, Wheeler argues that one's ability to flourish is determined by relative equality and social integration. 'Those in a position to influence their environment, and in a position to deploy a wide array of capabilities and connections, have better health and live longer lives' (p112-113).

The book concludes with a meditation on the biosemiotic nature of creativity, a taste of which can be obtained from the following quote:

We know that liveliness, or creativity, is a vital aspect of open systems. In biological systems creativity is at the level of *Umwelt* co-adaptation and organism-environment co-evolution. But in more complex animals, creativity (again, always a matter of creature and environment) takes the more complex form of inventiveness (not limited to primates by any means). In humans, the context of individual creativity is the evolution of the culture which is itself an accumulation of inventive responses to environmental pressures. Culture - meaning the state of inventive activity in a society at any one time - is the air we breathe, and it is upon this collectivity which individual acts of creativity depend ...' (p141-142).

The overall effect of the book, on this reader at least, is to open up new worlds of conceptual, and by no means purely conceptual, possibility in an intellectual concept that, as noted earlier, has long been dominated by an unhelpful oscillation between biologism and culturalism. That said, there are a few parts of the book which seem to regress, if that is not too strong a word, to a certain 'cyberneticism'. It is also the case that, while Peirce may inform the work by way of the writings of Hoffmeyer and other authors, there is little in the way of a reflection on the implications of a *triadic* semiotic (as opposed to a sign model of signified and signifier) for biosemiotics. To be sure, it is a matter of some debate whether Peirce really was as 'pansemioticist' as *The Whole Creature* seems to assume that he was.

All in all a remarkable book, one of a very few in what will hopefully be a growing literature on the subject.

*Nils Lindahl Elliot*