Mute

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Josephine Berry Slater and Pauline van Mourik Broekman (eds), *Proud to be Flesh: A Mute Magazine Anthology of Cultural Politics after the Net*, London, Mute Publishing in association with Autonomedia, 2009; 572pp, £24.99 paperback, £44.99 hardback.

Proud to be Flesh may appear a somewhat incongruous title for a volume explicitly positioned in relation to the net, but in *Mute* magazine's critical interrogation of contemporary developments in technoculture, it has always worked at a tangent to the common visions of the net, not least the dreams of immateriality that have populated this field. Flesh, here, is sensate matter, an association of bodies, needs, affects - not an ontological opposition to digital technology but a plane with which the latter is irrevocably enmeshed. The cover art to this rather beautiful book suggests as much, with its highly mediated image of a map of the world rendered in marbled raw red meat.

At this edge of flesh and technoculture, *Mute* magazine has constituted a publishing field of extraordinary versatility and breadth. In its pages one may equally find an investigation of the aesthetics of the *favela*, net art, eco-capital, or a left critique of multiculturalism. This eclecticism is in itself most appealing and rather unique, but it is infused with a consistently critical bent. Moreover, it is a criticality that *Mute* turns back upon itself and its media form, as the magazine is subject to problematisation and change in relation to a range of ongoing technological, political, and aesthetic concerns. It is indicative of this attitude that *Mute* has morphed from salmon pink broadsheet, to glossy magazine, coffee table book, and the current 'hybrid' of web-journal and 'print on demand' (POD) quarterly booklet. The aggregate of these features, the magazine's *style*, comes through strongly in the introductory essay to this volume, 'Disgruntled Addicts - Mute Magazine and its History', by the current editor, Josephine Berry Slater, who speculates that *Mute*'s eclecticism and criticality is a trace of the art school origins of its founders. Yet it is not a conventional art magazine - established to explore the conjunction of art and new digital technologies, *Mute* has come to orient itself toward neoliberal culture as a whole, across a spectrum of disciplinary orbits and empirical fields. Art, then, is here an *orientation*, what Berry Slater describes as a 'concerted battle against the dominant logic of specialization or static identity'.

Given *Mute*'s critical attention to media form it is no surprise that the editors of this volume are conscious of its status as an 'anthology'. In distilling fifteen years of the magazine's content they have provided a most valuable resource. Still, is something of *Mute*'s vitality and expressive singularity lost in this act of assembly, as texts that were produced in particular circumstances

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and distributed and consumed in varied mediums are bound in one volume? A negative answer is assured by the fact that this collection is fully part of *Mute*'s field of publishing practice and, as such, something of a purposeful entity in its own right. As the founders Pauline van Mourik Broekman and Simon Worthington stress in the Forward, the book is not a conventional anthology, a 'Best of *Mute*', but a critical working on the magazine itself. It 'treats the entire back catalogue of *Mute* as its critical arena' to investigate the distinct themes that have 'crystallised' from the multiple voices, ideas, and interventions that have comprised the magazine since its foundation in 1994, both reflecting back upon *Mute* and its time, and projecting possible modalities of future inquiry. With this crystallising aim, it is fitting that *Proud to be Flesh* takes the form of a dense and compact book, a media object tangential to the magazine itself.

Organised into nine thematic chapters, each assembles eight or so individual articles with lively and accessible introductions by Berry Slater, and presents the material in the order of its appearance in the magazine, so complementing the thematic aspects of the book with a strong temporal dynamic. This is most apparent in the first chapter, 'Direct Democracy and its Demons: Web 1.0 to Web 2.0', which addresses the move from the web's early tentative years to its mature, interactive and increasingly capitalized form. Like all the chapters it is framed as a political problematic, in this case one established on the web's fault-line of the 'direct democratic potential of many-to-many communication' and its capacity for perfecting the marketisation of social relations. On this fault-line, the chapter pits itself against the 'hype of the "digerati" prospectors', disinterring the neoliberal economic assumptions and technological determinism that so often lie behind the leading edge of technoculture. In this sense, *Mute* is indeed well-characterised by Berry Slater as the 'European anti-*Wired*'. And the 'Californian Ideology' of *Wired* and its ilk, as Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron describe it here, is taken apart in this volume with much aplomb and some mirth. The inclusion of a reply piece by *Wired* co-founder, Louis Rossetto, only serves to confirm *Mute*'s critique, with his attempts to rally around such free-market clichés as European 'social welfare policies [that] reward parasitical living rather than risk taking'.

The book does not counter neoliberal agendas with glib appeals to direct democracy and distributed networks. If there is a unifying impulse in *Mute* it is to excavate the radically transformative potentials of digital media, not least in its capacity to breach the producer/consumer divide in dispersing the creative function across populations. But this impulse is alloyed with a sober attention to the ways that interactive mechanisms, horizontal networks, and open creativity have become integral to advanced commercial practice. In seeking a definition of 'Web 2.0', Dmytri Kleiner and Brian Wyrick argue in this chapter that the best approximation is less as a novel technical form than as the principle post-dotcom business model. It is 'the private capture of [the] community created value' of social networking and collaboration, as content is created, modified and shared by users for free and monetised in

its routing through commercial portals (a development that, against previous peer-to-peer models, actually marks a *centralisation* of service provision and technological resource). In another chapter, 'Of Commoners and Criminals', the open source 'default orthodoxy' of the Creative Commons license is unpacked and an early interview with one of its creators, James Boyle, reveals that while some of us may impute the digital commons with a 'proto-communist phase of development', it is being formulated by others as a 'necessary adjunct to the market' in establishing an anti-monopoly mechanism for market competition (to quote from Berry Slater's chapter introduction). This chapter is typical of *Mute*'s grounded attention to specific objects and processes, approaching the complexity and political stakes of 'the common' through such entities as the Charter of the Forest, Free/Libre Open Source Software (FLOSS), Security Systems Standards and Certification Acts (SSSCA), and BitTorrent trackers.

In politics, too, horizontality has become a contemporary *doxa*. It has certainly had its remarkable effects, and the anthology makes apparent that *Mute* has been influenced by the concerns and organizational styles of the wave of anti-capitalist activity that was so prominent for at least part of the temporal arc of this anthology. The short texts on the 'starburst' J18 action in the City of London in 1999 and the somewhat less successful guerrilla gardening May Day a year later provide a flavour of this, with both pieces attending to the tactical dynamics and constraints of these events. However, the chapter on 'Organising Horizontally' also charts an increasing awareness of the problems with flat networks and 'open' organisational forms, most notably in J.J. King's 'The Packet Gang: Openness and its Discontents', which details how open organisational forms can cloak and nurture informal hierarchies, as they leave untouched the 'predicating inequities of the wider environment in which [an organisation] is situated'.

Given *Mute*'s close association with art worlds, it has been intriguing to observe the magazine move away from the lavish production and design values of its integrated image/text page layouts to the stripped-down concentration on text in its current POD quarterly. It is no doubt a response to constraints of time and money, as the introductory comments on *Mute*'s publishing political economy indicate, but it is not without a strong aesthetic of its own. Indeed, as *Mute* pushes at the potential of POD technology and the possibilities of a hybrid print/web media ecology, it may now be handling a *more* experimental aesthetic; certainly, the artifact of the POD booklet has a rather singular material quality, a strange conjunction of the disposable and the seductive. There are signs of this exploratory publishing aesthetic in *Proud to be Flesh*, and like the current magazine it concentrates on textual content. But it is also a rather luxurious object and has retained aspects of *Mute*'s earlier visual style, with three blocs of sixteen-page glossy inserts comprised of diagrams, artworks, issue covers, and page-layouts from the magazine.

As to the content itself, there are three chapters devoted to art practice: 'Net Art to Conceptual Art and Back', 'Assuming the Position: Art and/

Against Business', and 'The Open Work'. The latter chapter investigates the contemporary mutations of the avant-garde theme of open composition and its promise of the suppression of the author-function, providing critical assessments of Jacques Attali, spam email, Ghédalia Tazartès, Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, Detroit techno, Char Davies' *Osmose*, among other heterogeneous entities. The material complexity and potential of collective production across the boundaries of author, audience and machine comes through in this chapter as the still vital aesthetic promise of technoculture. For instance, Howard Slater's 'Guttural Cultural' on Tazartès is a wonderfully evocative encounter with the timbres, local affects, temporal thickness, and 'lessness' of this musician who invites the listener into a dislocation of the unified self with 'personified emotions made dissemblingly sonorous'. Yet the chapter also remains alert to the clichés and dangers of a fixation on the anti-author. A piece by Keston Sutherland on recent interest in the poetic capacities of spam in the tradition of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetics suggests that it may, for all its subtraction of authorial authority, be less an evisceration of 'English *qua* capitalism-logos' than a smug consumerist rejection of an offending African other.

Such concern with art's relation to wider political and economic environments runs throughout the chapter 'Assuming the Position: Art and/Against Business'. Anthony Davies and Simon Ford analyse the 'surge to merge' culture and economy, as art becomes one element along with music, fashion, design, club and political scenes that can be 'brought together, mediated and repackaged in a range of formats' conducive to entrepreneurial capital. This commercial articulation of culture has its new organizational forms, and Davies and Ford approach one of these, the phenomenon of 'Culture Clubs': networking associations - like First Tuesday, the Fourth Room and the ICA's The Club - of culture brokers, venture capitalists, educationalists, arts administrators, television executives, business consultants, that act as informal 'convergence zones for corporate and creative networks'. With these polymorphous agencies actively soliciting the margins and counter-discourses, Davies and Ford offer an important insight that in this networked commercial culture the topographical model of inside/outside upon which much critical art practice has been founded is now not only untenable, but a constitutive part of these new arrangements, providing the 'artificially constructed' 'outside', 'marginal', and 'socially engaged' practice upon which culture industries thrive. It is the straining to excavate and imagine new modes of critical art in relief from post-Fordist entrepreneurial strategies that makes the articles here on specific art practice so challenging, from Gustav Metzger's early computer art, the genre specificity of net art, or the Artist Placement Group, to *musique concrète*, and the appropriation of 'free' sound.

The attention to cultural entrepreneurialism might remain a touch rarefied if it were not interlaced in this book with an attention to the motions and stratifications of exploitation, or 'class'. This is tracked across two related modalities: the differential composition and valuation of global labour;

and the fragmentation and recomposition of territorial boundaries. The chapter 'Reality Check: Class and Immaterial Labour' engages with the wealth of conceptual figures that have emerged in the wake of new media theory and post-autonomist thought on contemporary class formations, from the 'virtual class' to the 'cognitariat'. Though the intricate production of 'precariousness', not transcendent 'immateriality', is the abiding figure here. Steve Wright ('Reality Check - Are We Living in an Immaterial World?') takes apart post-autonomist claims that labour has overcome the value form, and Angela Mitropoulos ('Precari-Us?') assesses the recent political problematic of 'precarity', warning against its assumption as a vanguard point of political aggregation under the impetus of a newly precarious middle class. Fordist temporal order and wage security was an historical exception, and then only for a minority, but we need careful assessment of the segmentations and particular dynamics of the field of precarious labour, not fictitious 'unities' whose procedures can replicate the hierarchical violence of capital.

Turning to the territorial patterns of class, the emphasis in the chapter 'Under the Net: the City and the Camp' is on the return of the internment camp and the proliferation of the border as agents of both the global fragmentation of labour and populations, and the differential ordering of people and wealth in one and the same territory. Processes of racialisation are integrated with this territorial control, as is apparent from John Barker's piece on the economies and brutalities of undocumented Chinese labour in the UK ('Cheap Chinese'), Matthew Hyland's analysis of the 2001 Bradford riots ('History Has Failed and Will Continue to Fail'), and Mitropoulos's essay ('Under the Beach the Barbed Wire') on the immanence to the social contract of the border and its racialised outside. These pieces bring into focus a theme that peppers the volume as a whole: the disintegration of the racialised and gendered privilege of Fordism is not a cause for lament but an opportunity to found an expanded politics on the multiple antagonisms newly revealed. It is a bold position to hold amidst the breakdown of the received political wisdoms and organisational structures of social democracy, yet it is also what makes the anthology's explorations so vibrant and contemporary.

The territorial modalities of class are also present in the thematic of the city. Delhi, Durban, New Orleans, and the new patterns of global urbanism feature here, though London has a particular, even intimate, presence in this volume. That the anthology is published in association with Autonomedia lends it a nice symmetry; if Autonomedia, along with its one-time stable mate Semiotext(e), has articulated something of a uniquely New York style of culture and politics, *Mute* is woven into, and has come to generate, a critical fabric specific to London. The Forward remarks that the magazine's history could 'quite easily be made to fit a certain clichéd image of a '90s creative project', but rather than riding a wave of new media bombast in the 'cool Britannia' mode, *Mute* has been immersed in the complexity of London's cultural and economic transformations and antagonisms over this period, as the Forward dramatizes in remarking upon the punctuated movement of *Mute*'s office

Eastwards as it tracked the displacement of working class communities by the 'creative economy'. This is a London of facets and fragments. It emerges, for example, as the 'vitrification of place…into planned "ambience"' in Benedict Seymour and David Panos's assault on the regeneration of central Hackney ('Fear Death by Water'), or through an eco audio tour of the City (in Anthony Iles's 'Heavy Opera'), or in a critique of London Development Agency's 'Creative London' programme ('Create Creative Clusters!' by David Panos).

In this immersive relation to the city one can detect the workings of a distinct model of political publishing. Ranging from interviews and review pieces to extended works of analysis, the texts in this anthology are highly varied in style and form. The authorship of the book is as multiple; comprised of sixty plus artists, new media practitioners, academics, activists, and independent researchers solicited from various locales and all, it appears, with situated investment in their subject of inquiry. This variability in content, style, and authorship cannot produce a set of refined truths or a political subject in the classical mode of radical media (as set out, for example, in Lenin's *What Is to be Done?*). *Proud to be Flesh* indicates a different practice, what we might call a *topological* media model, one that is founded on a distributed and immersed tracking of cultural and economic antagonisms and events. Less the communication of a message, the political product here is precisely the intensive field of collective problematisation that is brought into being. This anthology is a sampling of that field, and a projection back into it.

Left In Space

Tony Venezia

Mark Bould and China Miéville (eds), *Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction*, London, Pluto Press, 2009, 304 pp; £14.50 paperback.

The publication of *Red Planets* was complemented by a panel at the recent *Historical Materialism* conference in November 2009, chaired by co-editor China Miéville and featuring papers from contributors (and fellow co-editor) Mark Bould, Carl Freedman and Matthew Beaumont, at which the affinity between science fiction and Marxism was forcefully and often eloquently rearticulated. Published as part of the Marxism and Culture series at Pluto Press, series editors Mike Wayne and Esther Leslie comment that science fiction (SF) has generated much interest from Marxists, naturally 'drawn to a genre in which the dynamics between technology, social relations under capital, and the human body are explored and experimented with' (px). Such an affinity runs the risk of being overstated, but there is undoubtedly empathy between SF and the left in general. Whatever the definition of SF or cognate fantastic genres, historically, socialist and anarchist authors have frequently been drawn to SF as means of social critique and commentary. From H.G. Wells and Olaf Stapledon, through to New Wave authors like Michael Moorcock to the New Weird of Miéville himself, the default position for a great many writers in the field has often been on the left.

The growth of SF academic criticism itself was initially concurrent with, and arguably owes a debt to, the rise of New Left from the 1960s onward. *Red Planets* is a timely compendium that looks back to the important work of Fredric Jameson, Raymond Williams and, especially, Darko Suvin, while also seeking to move, unsteadily and with mixed results, beyond what might now be termed classical Marxist positions on SF. This is particularly evident in the choice of contributors, a nicely balanced mixture of widely published and established academics such as Freedman, Andrew Milner and the late William J. Burling, alongside younger scholars such as Bould and Sherryl Vint, who together co-edit the journal *Science Fiction Film and Television*, which, as the title indicates, marks something of a shift away from the predominately literary focus of much Marxist SF criticism. There is also something of a tension throughout the contributions, all of which share a tendency in attempting to negotiate with the legacy of Suvin's pioneering if at times restricting critical work, starting with Bould's opening introduction, 'Rough Guide to a Lonely Planet, from Nemo to Neo' and finding its most critical articulation in the persuasive concluding afterword by Miéville.

In fact, so pervasive is Suvin's presence that an alternative title for the collection could easily have been *After Suvin*. Given the enduring status of Suvin's thought within Marxist criticism of SF, a factor freely acknowledged

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by the editors, his writing in this instance is uncircumventable as all the contributions are positioned in relation to him in one way or another. Suvin co-founded the academic journal *Science Fiction Studies* (*SFS*) in 1973, devoted to serious scholarly study of the genre and overtly influenced by the New Left and critical theory. Unsurprisingly, writing from a Marxist perspective, Suvin himself emphasised the radical transformative and utopian elements in SF, themes taken up by regular *SFS* contributors Jameson and Freedman among others. *SFS* remains an important touchstone, even as its remit has expanded to deal with non-literary media and engage with non-Marxist approaches such as postmodernism and feminism. Suvin's other major role, in fact some might argue his primary contribution, has been to proselytise for a global SF, particularly with regards to his promotion of literatures from the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe. Suvin famously defined SF as the 'literature of cognitive estrangement',[1] a genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the existence and intersection of cognition and estrangement achieved by the 'narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional "novum" [...] validated by cognitive logic' (*Metamorphoses*, p63). Suvin made a sharp distinction between SF and Fantasy writing, one that although he has modified he has held to, noting that the latter also engages in the process of estrangement but was generally not characterised by any emphasis on cognition. The development of a formalist emphasis on estrangement has had a massive influence, and, unsurprisingly, owes much to both the concept of *ostranenie*, the aesthetic of defamiliarisation as derived from the Russian Formalist school, and the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, the critical distancing effect held to be so crucial for any genuinely political art. Freedman in particular has elaborated a more nuanced notion of cognition arguing that it is not so much cognition proper that is at stake as a cognition effect, that is 'the attitude of the text itself to the kind of estrangements being performed'.[2]

1. Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1979, p4.

2. Carl Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*, Hanover, Wesleyan University Press, 2000, p18.

This legacy is signalled in Bould's generally appealing introduction, that includes an ingenious if somewhat a-historical comparative reading of *20,000 Leagues under the Seas* and *The Matrix*, which refers somewhat pompously to the 'Suvin event', the publication by Suvin of his essay 'On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre' in 1972 which later formed a key chapter in *Metamorphoses*. 'However one responds to it', writes Bould, 'Suvin's definition (and its elaboration) itself arrived like a novum, reordering SF theory and criticism around it, idiosyncratically and contingently to Marxism' (p19). Such an exaggerated claim attempts nothing less than a historical reconfiguring of SF criticism explicitly if not uniquely around Marxist cultural critique at the expense of other strands. This is the real Suvinian legacy, exclusive rather than inclusive in a way that curiously mirrors the hiving off of SF from Fantasy and the Gothic, a double legacy in effect. On the one hand Suvin's conceptualisation has decisively contributed to a by and large welcomed professionalization of SF scholarship over the past forty years, while on the other he has in essence condemned work from cognate genres and indeed

much SF as incompatible with the rules of cognitive estrangement. Anyone involved with the, sometimes competing, academic pedagogies of Gothic and SF studies will most likely have experienced firsthand the results of this bifurcation. What is ironic is that for all the talk of SF as a redeemable, reflective and critical aspect of mass culture, the Suvinian legacy lapses into an almost Adornoesque high cultural disdain for the popular. This is the legacy, or more accurately the orthodoxy, that the contributors, with varying degrees of engagement, contend with.

Red Planets divides unevenly into three segments: 'Things to Come', 'When Worlds Collide' and 'Back to the Future', bookended by pieces from the editors. The first is dedicated to examining what Bould calls 'the utopian trace of Ernst Bloch's Not-Yet' (p19), Bloch being an influential thinker on Marxist SF criticism for his theorising of utopia and the novum subsequently taken up and elaborated by Suvin et al. Matthew Beaumont's opening chapter, 'The Anamorphic Estrangement of Science Fiction', straight away offers a rearticulation of the notion of estrangement and its relation to SF literary and visual texts. Anamorphosis is the perspectival device that distorts or disfigures graphic art and requires a repositioning of the viewer's point of view to bring about re-composition. Strangely, for a piece on SF, Beaumont uses as an example Holbein the Younger's portrait of *The Ambassadors* (1533). The painting is ruptured by the warped, skewed image of a skull that can only be reintegrated into the perspectival order by the spectator viewing the painting from an odd angle. 'Anamorphic perspective', writes Beaumont, 'works by figuring an intrusion into everyday life that estranges it' (p41). His claim is that the defamiliarising devices associated with SF are equivalent to anamorphosis.

What is not made satisfactorily clear, despite Beaumont's confident synthesis of materials, is why this device is at all unique to SF. *The Ambassadors* carries with it, surely, an affective charge of Gothic sublimity and Beaumont's thesis ends up restating Suvin without really adding anything new. In fact, anamorphosis is a perfect model through which to read Fantasy and the Gothic, especially, one might add, Miéville's own self-consciously hybridic fiction. The remaining chapters in part one from Burling, Freedman and John Rieder take up further debates concerning the estranging properties of utopia and utopian thought so prevalent in Marxist criticism, but without suggesting new possibilities that Beaumont at least hints at. Burling's piece looks at the problem of imagining an utopian art through the writing of anarchist Ursula Le Guin and socialist Kim Stanley Robinson and pits the latter against the former. Freedman's contribution constructs a dialectic that plays off the deflationary tendencies of film noir against the inflationary tendencies of SF, focusing on films where these two tendencies exist uneasily, as in fact they do in Freedman's argument which would benefit from expansion and elaboration. Rieder concludes this section with an interesting if redundant reading of colonial subtexts in Wim Wender's overblown film, *Until the End of the World* (1991) that develops the ideas he explored in his

recent publication, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008). Fascinating as some of these arguments are, particularly Beaumont's, they never really break free from the Suvinian orthodoxy.

Part two, 'When Worlds Collide', is less coherently arranged but all the more interesting in its variety. All of the pieces grapple with contemporary literary SF, using it as a way of reflecting back on Marxist theories. Sherryl Vint's contribution, 'Species and Species-Being', reflexively uses SF to critique Marxism for its exclusive focus on human labour through Cordswainer Smith's stories on sentient bio-engineered animals denied human status. Engaging with the emergent sub-discipline of animal studies, and especially the work of Bob Torres and Donna Haraway, she argues that the Marxist theory of labour that separates humans from animals is increasingly called into question as it is predicated on a speciesism revealed to be contingent and historical. What is required by the theorising of animals as alienated labour, argues Vint, is a 'rethinking of the concept of value, and of how we understand the labour of animals and those employed under such conditions' (p131). By reflecting back on Marxism through the lens of Smith's fiction, Vint suggests new possibilities.

Steven Shaviro offers a fascinating take on the idea of the Singularity, the moment at which technological advance reaches a point beyond all human control, usually envisaged in terms of machines being capable of producing other machines. Reading Charles Stross' *Accelerando* (2005), which imagines powerful corporate AIs, Shaviro denounces uncritical conceptualisations of the Singularity as a 'fantasy of finance capital', nothing less than the 'closest we come to a master narrative in this neo-liberal, post-Fordist age of flexible accumulation and virtual money flows' (p115) and reaches the inescapable conclusion that the Singularity is already here. Concluding part two Philip Wegner reads idiosyncratic left libertarian Ken MacLeod's Fall Revolution Quartet as post-Cold War texts overtly concerned with revolutionary praxis in times of crisis that portray 'the future as permanent revolution' (p149). MacLeod is one of the most intriguing, formally and politically, of contemporary SF writers and Wegner's piece is hopefully a prelude to greater critical attention

Bould sums up part three, 'Back to the Future', as a return to 'the Suvin event' (p21), reiterating the influence once again while signifying possibilities for re-thinking the paradigm by moving beyond and before Suvin. Iris Luppa looks at contemporary Marxist responses to SF film of Weimar Germany, especially Fritz Lang, and attempts to recuperate progressive readings from films dismissed by leftist critics at the time. Rob Latham maps the concurrent emergences of new Marxist geography and New Wave SF in Thomas Disch's vision of entropic urban decline *334* (1972). Darren Jorgensen struggles to reclaim Althusser for SF by recapitulating the debate between science and history. Andrew Milner's penultimate essay, 'Utopia and Science Fiction Revisited', revisits Suvin and Jameson, this time via Raymond Williams'

cultural materialism and the categories of 'selective tradition' and 'structure of feeling'. Milner re-examines why Suvin and Jameson seem so keen to elide the utopian with SF while excluding fantasy. For Milner this elision obscures the contingent historical and social conditions that inform them by resorting to transhistorical generic classifications.

Miéville's concluding afterword, appropriately entitled 'Cognition as Ideology', continues the dismantling of Suvin and Freedman's separation of SF and Fantasy started by Milner by turning Suvin's logic inside out via a dialectic of negation. Miéville rightly points out that much of what passes for science in SF, and is used as a definitional trope to separate SF from a putatively irrational Fantasy either by Suvinians or hard SF readers, is nothing of the sort. The cognition effect works instead to persuade the reader of the function of charismatic authority, whether of the science/scientist figure or, on a metaliterary level, of the authority of the text and its author function (pp238-239). As such, Miéville suggests, the cognition effect is more ideological than previous Marxist critics had presumed.

Miéville's own fiction operates in some ways as a repudiation of the Suvinian orthodoxy, located on the margins and peripheries where generic categories converge, coalesce and diverge. Both Bould and Miéville have contributed to a growing body of what might be clumsily termed neo-neo-Marxian genre criticism in which they have reflexively moved through and beyond the post-Frankfurt School orthodoxies of Marxist critiques of mass culture.[3] This makes it somewhat surprising and a little disappointing that this strand was not developed further in this anthology. Miéville writes that an early proposed subtitle for *Red Planets* was 'Marxism, Science Fiction, Fantasy' (p231). It is unclear as to why this avenue was not pursued further. Miéville's explanation, that the tenacious purchase of the Suvin orthodoxy and 'its ideological hold even on those critical of it, may be one reason why - with no intentionality that neither editor can recall - fantasy disappeared from the volume's subtitle and the information for contributors' (p232), is surely unsatisfactory. It may be, given the enduring appeal of SF to Marxist critics as evidenced in the popularity of the *Red Planets* panel at Historical Materialism at which even a late arriving Fredric Jameson could not get a seat, that further volumes and conferences will be necessary to correct this imbalance. As Miéville himself concludes, '*Red Planets* we have. We should not neglect red dragons' (p245).

3. Mark Bould, 'The Dreadful Credibility of Absurd Things: A Tendency in Fantasy Theory', *Historical Materialism*, 10, 4 (2002): 51-88; China Miéville, 'Editorial Introduction', *Historical Materialism*, 10, 4 (2002): pp39-49.

The Open Book Of The Humanities

Ignaz Cassar

James J. Bono, Tim Dean, Ewa Plonowska Ziarek (eds), *A Time for the Humanities: Futurity and the Limits of Autonomy*, Fordham University Press, New York 2008; pp273, £21.95 paperback.

What does the future hold for the humanities? Might there be a future that remains receptive to the intellectual practices of the humanities? Indeed, might there be a future at all that will still matter to those who identify themselves as humanists? The collection of essays brought together in *A Time for the Humanities* prompts us to recognize that the question of the uncertain futures for the humanities is first of all a *critical matter* for the humanities themselves. As such, the question about the fate of the humanities and their critical legacies in the light of economic uncertainty, political scepticism, and their potential redundancy as a field and scholarly practice is a pressing one.[1] Yet this is not just a question of ensuring that the right kind of future is secured, one within which the humanities are guaranteed the presence they might claim to deserve. And neither is it a matter for simply arguing for the irreplaceability of the humanities by producing the evidential goods for their purportedly indispensable role within a society's knowledge economies.[2] It is rather a question of the field's autonomy versus its heteronomy - and it is this question that is opened out in *A Time for the Humanities*.

At a time when the humanities are undergoing substantial changes it might be hard not to empathize with the hopeful humanist who wishes to stay abreast so as to adapt to unpredictable times to come. In other words, if the humanities are deemed to lose the outlines they were once entrusted with, and thus also their alleged autonomy within which the humanist could take shelter, then one might say that it is not unreasonable to invest in the future. (Is not 'investing in the future' at once capitalism's unrelenting premise and its consolation?) Still, the returns of this investment *will* be more than one could reason with. What the humanities may yield from the endowments of futurity derives its force *also* from the nonhuman agency of time, thus bringing to the fore 'the constitutive tension between human and nonhuman aspects of agency and praxis' (p3). Or put differently, 'the orientation of any praxis towards the unforeseeable future' involves manifestations 'of the nonhuman "agency" of time' (p3).

The standpoints adopted in *A Time for the Humanities,* particularly those emphasizing non-human agency, direct us towards a thinking as to how acts of practice in the humanities cannot be solely reduced to the building of an autonomous subject, but how the very potentiality sustaining such practice is 'based on the heteronomy rather than the autonomy of the subject' (p4). As the editors propose: 'Unlike related terms in contemporary theory - such

1. The editors attend to discussions that address, within the US context, the transformations of the post-war university with regards to issues such as research ethics, internationalization, academic governance and public accountability. See Jonathan R. Cole, Elinor G. Barber, Stephen R. Graubard (eds), *The Research University in a Time of Discontent*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994; David A. Hollinger (ed), *The Humanities and the Dynamics of Inclusion since World War II*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University 2006; David Marshall (ed), 'The Humanities and its Publics', *ACLS Occasional Paper* 61, 2006, www.acls.org/Publications/OP/61_Humanities_and_Publics.pdf.

2. Those engaging in academic research in the United Kingdom will be reminded of the political attention given to 'impact' since 2008 as a key parameter to assess the quality of institutional research in UK higher education through the so-called 'Research Excellence Framework' and its call for ensuring that academic outcomes be socially and economically contributory. The gap of contention opens then when the 'contributory', defined as 'positive impact', does not, or, perhaps, cannot meet the positivistic

intent it is attributed by a *given* politics. For a range of policy documents in relation to 'impact', see http://www.hefce.ac.uk/research/ref/

as heterogeneity, otherness, or difference - the notion of heteronomy, in addition to maintaining the reference to differentiation and to the multiplicity of heterogeneous principles, more specifically links "otherness" to the questioning of subjective autonomy and agency as the principle of freedom' (p4). What follows, then, is that in order to realize the critical drives of the future, that is, to expose the humanities to futurity's 'ought to', entails the unveiling of the agency of time itself. What is more, such turning towards the future brings to the fore the broader entanglements of human praxis of doing and thinking with the *non*-human - of time, its demands and stakes, but also of the letter and its inscribing forces, of the topos of the unconscious and its drives, of the technology of writing and its apparatuses, of the humanities' edict and its evolving disciplinary accounting.

Such premises as the technology of writing and its apparatuses are echoed in the book's topical structuring, which gathers the viewpoints of the twelve contributors around four thematic parts: 'The New and its Risks' (Paola Marrati, Andrew Benjamin, Martin Jay); 'Rhetoric and the Future of the Political' (Ernesto Laclau, Jean-Luc Nancy, Rey Chow); 'Heteronomy and Futurity in Psychoanalysis' (Rudi Visker, Tim Dean, Elizabeth Weed); 'Inventions' (Steve McCaffery, N. Katherine Hayles, Doris Sommer). And while in some of the contributions the authors impart longstanding research interests with accomplished scholarly devotion, these essays attain, nonetheless, a significant momentum from drawing compelling critical synergies across each other in support of the book's editorial objectives. As such, this is an *edited* collection that displays confidence with what it is, without requiring the editorial overdetermination that favours artificial hyperbole, or the kind of editorial restraint that casts little more than a shadow of monotonous guidance onto its texts. Providing an open but deeply engaging arena for thinking the futures of the humanities, *A Time for the Humanities* brings into view, from a range of theoretical approaches, how the 'makings' of such futures simultaneously spring forth, in fact, from '[t]he multiple senses of human and nonhuman agency […]' (p4).

Remaining in conversation with thinkers indebted to the traditions of continental philosophy and psychoanalysis and their critical conjugations within queer, feminist and postcolonial thought, the collected positions are an encouraging demonstration of the spirit of interdisciplinarity. In this light, the editors' insistence 'on the necessity of thinking together all three "inhuman" dimensions of human practice: digital technology, utopian temporality, and "extimate" sexuality' (p4) is also convincingly put into practice in the book. The chapters address these problematics from different contexts of creation, including filmmaking, art practice, writing, architecture, rhetoric, critique and philosophical practice, without detracting this reader from gaining a strong sense of their inter-related critical purpose. Always brought into relief in their intersections with the wider socio-historical and political conditions which frame these practices, the texts ultimately aim at revealing heteronomy '[…] as an enabling rather than threatening condition of agency' so as to permit 'a

shift from recuparable difference […] to unimaginable, not-yet-encountered potentialities' (p5).

The revelation of heteronomy as an enabling condition brings into view another significant issue - regardless of one's willingness for adaptation or reluctance thereof - namely the relational dynamics between an unknown outside that is perceived as being potentially antagonistic to the humanities and their implicit missions, and, conversely, in wishing to assert their own future, the humanities' internally imposed obligation to react to that outside. It is this problematization that provides the wider conceptual frame through which the contributions assembled in *A Time for the Humanities* invite the reader to weigh up to what extent the humanities will continue carrying their weight. So, how should the humanist react then in this moment of heightened self-doubt? What kinds of actions are to be taken? And just what future *ought* there to be enacted?

It is those who can adapt, we have learnt, that become the survivors. So surely the humanists' instincts would follow suit in order to warrant a future in which the humanists have not become another extinct species. If the humanities want to survive, then adaptation is the necessary means to an end for building a future in which they still feature. And it is precisely on this point that the book's critical voices intervene. We might dare to predict - and, at times, might well be able to do so more or less accurately, too - what the future holds, but such casting forth relies on the *pre*-diction of what is to become the 'future'. What is cast aside thereby is the need to take into consideration the dimensions of futurity. As the editors call to mind in their introduction to the volume, 'the urgent concern with the future cannot be limited to critical assessments of our situation or to practical projects for change' (p2). To think of the future, to predict its shape and one's place within it, also brings about an opening up of one's self to future's temporal condition: futurity. Hence, if we want the humanities to critically account for their future, indeed, if the future is to be a critical matter at all, then we also have to take into account that which remains outside the accountable - which is exactly what can become revealed when allowing for the futurity of future.[3] 'This necessary implication', the editors write, 'arises precisely because the very force of the "ought to" - on which the specific content of pragmatic prescriptions depends - opens the unknown and unforeseeable dimensions of temporality' (p3).

'Although always embedded in the historical situation, the relation to the future, whether theoretical or prescriptive, is counterfactual; it exceeds the present possibilities of thought and action' (p3). This, the book's contributors caution accordingly, should not be taken as an excuse to drift off into an escapism of the wistful kind in the hope of exempting the humanities from that which is supposedly not meant to fall into their field of reference; or worse, read the potentialities induced by embracing the (non-)signifying dimensions of futurity as a pretext for divesting the humanities of all things either 'non-humanistic' or, indeed, 'nonhuman' - a sort of decontamination of the field as if thereby to exonerate the humanities from their professed

3. A detour into French is useful to differentiate more clearly the semantic layers of 'futurity' and 'future', as French uses '*l'avenir*' and '*le futur*' to denote futural dimensions. Futurity tends to correspond with the French '*l'avenir*', that which is to come, which arrives and breaks through, in contradistinction to '*le futur*', which lies in anticipation and is predicted, in the sense of a present future. For an incisively rendered account of 'futurity' and 'future' in French deconstruction, see Jean-Paul Martinon, *On Futurity: Malabou, Nancy and Derrida*, Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

dilemmas about a compromised identity and the anxieties such might stir up. The historic challenges instigated by information technology and digitality, prosthetically refiguring and expanding bodies, postcolonial unframings of geopolitical adherence, arousing assertions of sexological non-normativity, etc., have not only left clear marks on the disciplinary corpus of the humanities but have also changed its customs of practice and the means employed. At this point, one may think, with contributor N. Katherine Hayles, of that most symbolic device with which the humanist's work is so intimately associated, the book, and how its form is being taken to *bits* by the makings of digitality and its informational structures. And it is in looking towards the future that some cannot but foresee the book becoming a relic of the past. Dead ends.

The vision of an impending 'death of the book' shall serve here as just one example for the recurring and perhaps, symptomatic, anxieties of terminality underlying the fields of the humanities. *A Time for the Humanities* takes issue with these anxieties and reflects on the motives for their returns; in the convergence of these anxieties the phantom image of a time without the humanities comes into manifestation. Indeed, what is at stake, in taking once more the book as representative cipher for the current concerns encroaching the humanities' identity, is the recognisability of the corpus of the humanities and its independence from other fields. Thus, the 'demise' of the book is significant not so much because a treasured object might reach its use-by date, but rather because of history's connotative inscriptions of the book as the very guarantor of humanistic virtues - its pages symbolizing the enlightened values with which the humanities have come to identify: speculative thought, authorial freedom, creative play and the practices of self-formation that one associates with legacies such as Humboldt's vision of *Bildung*.[4] Hence, the book's wearing away, imagined or actual, indicates also an unravelling of the assumed scope of the humanities and the disciplinary selfhood that furnishes the humanist with a space of her own.

A Time for the Humanities invites us to take up the task to keep the future engaged in the humanities: if our yearning to seize the future is not to run the risk of foreclosing us from the alterity of the not-yet-encountered, emerging from the spacing and temporizing work performed in the 'to-come' of futurity,[5] then the question 'what does the future hold?' remains insufficient. The future, and the future of the humanities, is never just out 'there', or ahead of us; rather, it is inflecting the present, erupting within it. We may reach out for it, in anticipation, but the future already occupies us - *now*.

4. On Humboldt's conception of the subject-enabling *Bildung*, see David Sorkin, 'Wilhelm Von Humboldt: The Theory and Practice of Self-Formation (*Bildung*), 1791-1810', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 44:1, 1983: 55-73.

5. I borrow the term '"to-come"' from Martinon who, in drawing on Derrida's work on futurity, employs it in English to render the connotations associated with the *work* of the French '*l'avenir*' performed in '*à-venir*': '"To-come" is at once *yet*-to-come [*avenir*] in the way it relates to some future present (action), and coming [*avenant*] in the sense of a secret "unhingement" that comes to disturb this future present, this *avenir*, action, or event' (p3). *À-venir* or spacing (and) temporizing is therefore related to a certain alterity, but one which defies anticipation, reappropriation, calculation, or any form of predetermination' (p5). Jean-Paul Martinon, *On Futurity*, pp1-26.

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