

# THE OFFICES OF COMEDY

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*Robert Lapsley*

Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2008, 230pp; £14.95 paperback

Slavoj Žižek is effusive in his praise of this book and it is easy to see why. *The Odd One In* is a brilliant contribution to the theorising of comedy. Introducing her earlier book, *Ethics of the Real*, Žižek admitted that he was ‘agape with envy and fury, feeling threatened in the very core of my philosopher’s existence, awestruck by the sheer beauty and vigour of what I had just read’.<sup>1</sup> He has even more cause to be threatened here. Like Mladen Dolar, the third principal member of the Slovenian Lacanian school, Alenka Zupančič lives in the shadow of Žižek’s bravura performances and theoretical fireworks but in many respects she is his equal - her exposition of Lacan in *Why psychoanalysis?* is as profound as any of his - while in others she surpasses him - most notably in her superior understanding and consequently more just estimate of Deleuze.

In the tradition of Jacques-Alain Miller - to whom the Slovenian Lacanians are so deeply indebted - her starting point is the lack in the Other: put at its simplest, the lack of the signifier which would enable self-completion. Frequently this notion is translated into, and thereby reduced to, the classic themes of existentialist philosophy: the human subject alienated from society and separated from something of life. Zupančič’s thinking on what she terms ‘the subject’s unrepresented presence in the Real’ (p167) is much more sophisticated. The lack is a gap which at one and the same time ‘separates the subject from and links her to her enjoyment and/or symbolic function’ (p201). In other words, there is always a gap between the subject and the signifier on which its existence depends: the gap inhabited by the notorious object a. Following the Lacan of *Seminar XVII*, Zupančič conceives this object as at once lack - insofar as the object a is the eternally missing object of desire - and excess: the subject, in its failure to attain the lost object, produces a surplus jouissance whose satisfactions disregard the subject’s conscious wishes.

On this basis Zupančič makes short work of the doxa that comedy reconciles us to our finitude. Man’s finitude, she writes, is ‘corroded’ by ‘desire in its radical negativity’ (p52) and the drive with its generation of surplus jouissance. Consequently, ‘[not] only are we not infinite, we are not even finite’ (p53). And this is the source of comedy for, as Zupančič argues, ‘If humans were “only human(s)” ... there would be no comedy’ (p49).

This contradiction within finitude and its manifestation in a surplus jouissance - the *plus-de-jouir* - is apparent in a number of comic modes. For example, she discerns the *plus-de-jouir* operating in characters like Molière’s miser, Harpagon, whose mode of enjoyment is at odds with his ego. In such

1. Slavoj Žižek, ‘Foreword’ to Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, 2000, London, Verso, pxiii.

characters, she argues, the id obtains satisfactions whatever the stresses and misery experienced by the ego. Similarly she detects in the comedy situations which develop around a character and his double, the split between the subject and the signifier, and between the subject and its self-image. In such comedies, she claims, the redoubling, by introducing a surplus object, not only ruptures the subject's imaginary unity but creates a short circuit between the heterogeneous elements within subjectivity which can neither unite nor separate. Thirdly in comedies of mistaken identities she argues that the comedy again arises from a troublesome surplus. As she astutely observes, whereas in thrillers the suspense arises from an impending cataclysm - the question is whether the hero will escape in time - in comedies the catastrophe has already occurred and the suspense arises from the question of how they will manage its effects, in particular the surplus object. Hence, in the prototype of this form of comic suspense, the question is not whether the husband will discover the proverbial lover in his wife's closet but rather 'what will happen after he does' (pp92-3).

Following Žižek, Zupančič considers the notorious divided subject of psychoanalysis to be only one aspect of a fundamental non-coincidence: she fully subscribes to his notion of the 'incomplete ontological constitution of reality'.<sup>2</sup> Hence, while commending Bergson's perspicacity in many areas of comedy, she is deeply critical of his central thesis that ultimately all comedy derives from a single underlying formula: 'something mechanical encrusted upon the living'; for Bergson's opposition of automatism, rigidity and inertia to the live energy that is the *élan vital* and identification of the comic with those moments where the automatic and rigid briefly gain the upper hand suggest that life is given in itself prior to the disturbing arrival of the automatic.

Against this, Zupančič insists that life is never 'only life': there is a 'non-coincidence of life with itself that takes the form of a relationship, and it is this relationship that can occasionally strike us as mechanical' (p118). The mechanical is not extrinsic but intrinsic to life. This is particularly evident with language which is not simply an external imposition but also constitutive of life. The mechanical is not to be located on one side of an opposition between vitality and the supposedly dead letter of language, for body and signifier are co-implicated. Rigidities and automatism emerge - for example, to comic effect - not as the polar opposite of some putative 'pure life' but as instances of petrification within the processes generated by the difficult co-implication of subject and Other.

It will be apparent that, in the theorization of comedy and all the other topics she covers, Zupančič has few if any peers: this book is a tour de force. That said, I would make a number of comments on the scope and limits of her theses. For example, when, to narrow her focus, she distinguishes comedy from the comic it is unclear whether her line of demarcation can hold and whether it is not ultimately tailored to her Lacanian slant. Are there not elements of humour whose salience is readily apparent in the classic comedies

2. Alenka Zupančič, *Why Psychoanalysis?*, 2008, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, p114.

she discusses? For instance, in many jokes, as she briefly acknowledges, the laughter is sadistic - think of all those situations where the butt of the joke is not in possession of the knowledge shared by those laughing at him - and this is also the case with much comedy. Audiences laugh at the self-misrecognitions which structure Hancock, Fawlty, Partridge, Frasier and Brent imagining that while others are deceived/conned they are not. For Zupančič, such tendentious humour is merely a smokescreen making it 'possible for us to confront universal nonsense as the presupposition of all sense' (p144); the pleasures afforded by aggression and obscenity block a direct confrontation with the real, paradoxical, and contingent constitution of our world, in all its precariousness and ambiguity. However, Zupančič here is, in quasi-Deleuzean terms, perhaps too worthy of the comedic event, for comedy is often a less noble business than she allows. Laughter has been a component of some of humanity's direst actions and the cruelty of such humour is not wholly absent from her examples of classic comedy.

So, although Zupančič's work ranks with the classics by Bergson and Freud, it is no more than theirs, the definitive account of comedy. It seems that, while comics with their punch-lines can have the last word, theorists never can.

# BUCCANEERS

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*Simon Harvey*

Daniel Heller-Roazen, *The Enemy of All: Piracy and the Law of Nations*, New York, Zone Books, 2009, 295pp, £21.95 hardback

Early on in Daniel Heller-Roazen's excellent book on the relation between piracy and law the author taps into the Roman sensibility on piracy: 'In speaking to a pirate, in dealing with a pirate ... one becomes a pirate oneself' (p21). For Cicero the pirate is the 'common enemy of all' and in dealing with this terrifying figure, this exception, one steps over a line and disrobes oneself of the mantel of Roman Law, becoming in doing so an exception oneself. But Heller Roazen's subject is not the pirate per se, rather law's understanding of what constitutes piracy, and the nature of the line, juridical and geographical, that keeps it apart from us.

There have been many authors, historians and novelists alike, who have stepped over the line - as it were perching themselves on the shoulder of the crimson tunicked pirate and recounting his every colourful deed - but what they are erasing in doing so is the idea of piracy as truly exceptional. This might seem rather an odd thing to say given that pirates are considered so exceptionally bold and daring, but Heller Roazen's use of terms like 'exception' and 'enemy of the human species', along with his comprehensive referencing of Roman society and its guiding legal terms, immediately reminds us that this is an academic study, one to be considered alongside Giorgio Agamben's work on the exception in *Homo Sacer*, rather than a more shipboard and romanticized account like *A General History of the Most Notorious Pyrates* (attributed to Daniel Defoe) or Hakim Bey's *Pirate Utopias*, neither of which have any place in this book.

In writing a book about pirates that contains hardly any pirates Heller-Roazen is taking something of a risk, but in one sense he is acting in the spirit of piracy itself for, as he points out, the term comes, in part, from the Greek word *peira*, meaning 'trial' or 'attempt', and hence risk. The risk, as with most academic books is that it might come across as a little dry. This isn't the case here: for the most part Heller-Roazen's study is both exciting and scholarly in a readable sort of way.

In one sense *The Enemy of All* is rather arid in that it roams around the solid, decidedly earthbound walls of the city state for its inspiration on law rather than the ocean (which is the original space of exception for the pirate). But the narrative and development of the theme is far from dry in that its literary and mythic analogies propel the argument like a siege weapon towards a modern conception of piracy at the end of the book that emerges not so much with Somali pirates but with hi-jacking and in the outrageous actions

of so-called 'rogue states'. Also, even as he analyzes Roman law - for instance making erudite distinctions between civilized *res publicae*, *res sacrae* and the piratical realm of natural law - he gathers no dust because he clearly knows his stuff inside out and therefore keeps the argument moving along at a pace.

One of Heller-Roazen's main contentions is that piracy is the enemy of the state of which we are a part, and that its warring, unlike wars between nation states, is alarmingly untreatable and perpetual. Somewhat surprisingly then, almost two thirds of the book is about the implication of the state in acts of piracy. He plays this out through a series of fascinating examples as varied as mock trial cases involving pirates chronicled in Seneca the Elder; stories of depredation by state sanctioned pirates of Chalcedon (near present day Istanbul); piratical kidnapping by Dionysus; Dutch imperialists perceived as pirates in the Far East; U-boat packs menacing the Mediterranean and Atlantic; and the similarity between sixteenth- and seventeenth-century privateers and modern-day partisans. He convincingly peels away these layers of false piracy until he arrives at a genuine act of piracy, the 'crime against humanity', practised for aeons, maintains Heller-Roazen, by pirates but personified, for Hannah Arendt, in Adolf Eichmann.

There is not a single mention of piracy in the final chapter but we have long since known by this stage in our reading that this isn't a book about Blackbeard. Instead it is a daring raid on the complex juridical space of piracy, and as its literal space has expanded from the seas to the air and into the terrain of rogue states he leaves us with the message that piracy, once a geographical as well as legal exception, can now emerge anywhere. For those becoming interested in this realm, which, of course might be all of us, *The Enemy of All* is a good place to begin.

# MULTICULTURAL NATIONALISM

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*Jamie Hakim*

Ben Pitcher, *The Politics Of Multiculturalism: Race and Racism in Contemporary Britain*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2009, 224pp, £50 hardback

It is peculiar having your politics stolen from you, and that is exactly what you feel after reading Ben Pitcher's *The Politics Of Multiculturalism: Race and Racism in Contemporary Britain*. What Pitcher argues is that the Labour government under Tony Blair (1997 - 2007) appropriated the term Multicultural for a racially inflected nationalism that Labour inherited from preceding Tory governments. This is a shocking about turn for a political position that anti-racists have assumed over the last thirty years, but one that Pitcher demonstrates convincingly, providing a compelling analysis of New Labour's abject failure to alleviate Britain's racial tensions.

First, Pitcher redefines what multiculturalism is usually assumed to mean. Against Stuart Hall's definition of multiculturalism as 'the strategies and policies adopted to govern or manage the problems of diversity and multiplicity which multi-cultural societies throw up' (p21) Pitcher contends that multiculturalism has been depoliticised and, 'does not necessarily signify anything beyond a basic recognition of the facticity of social and cultural diversity' (p20). Now a 'politically neutral' signifier, multiculturalism can be articulated in any number of political projects - even those that are racist; and this is precisely, Pitcher argues, what happened under New Labour.

Pitcher illustrates his argument with analysis of key New Labour documents - speeches, legislation, pamphlets and policy statements - all of which constitute a discursive formation which he calls 'Multicultural Nationalism'. The basic premise of Multicultural Nationalism is that it is acceptable to be multicultural only if that multiculturalism is delimited by Britain's national borders. Through rigorous discourse analysis, Pitcher shows how New Labour have been so effective at holding this oxymoronic formation together and the devastating consequences that resulted.

New Labour, Pitcher argues, enforced the impossible articulation between multicultural and nationalism by what psychoanalysis calls 'disavowal'-when the psyche is aware of a traumatic perception but refuses its explicit recognition. Disavowal is the structuring principle of New Labour race policy and Pitcher illustrates this with many examples, the clearest being the Denham report written in response to the race riots in the North of England in 2001:

Our society is multicultural, and is shaped by the interaction between people of diverse cultures. There is no single dominant and unchanging

culture into which all must assimilate. The public realm is founded on negotiation and debate between competing viewpoints, at the same time as it upholds inviolable rights and duties. Citizenship means finding a common place for diverse cultures and beliefs, consistent with our core values (p88).

The disavowal is straightforward: we are multicultural as long as these multiple cultures adhere to a singular set of core values. What are these 'core values' if they are not a 'single dominant and unchanging culture' into which we all must assimilate? And what are the consequences of a discursive formation constituted by statements such as this?

The book explores this question over a range of case studies: from the race riots to the use of feminism in justifying Britain's role in the 'War on Terror'. Where Pitcher is most impressive is his chapter on 7/7 where he shows that the suicide bombings of 2005 were a logical consequence of Blair's Multicultural Nationalism. Pitcher counterposes Multicultural Nationalism with the Islamic concept of the Ummah, translated as the 'community of believers' and therefore meaning the whole Muslim world. Multicultural Nationalism explicitly prohibits this sort of trans-national identification and, Pitcher argues in a remarkable flourish, it is precisely because transnational identification is prohibited that the suicide bombers so murderously over-invested in it.

The greatest strength of this impressive book is the tight focus of the argument. I also wonder whether this is a weakness, though. The structure is so tight that it cannot speculate outside the effects of New Labour state policy. At one point Pitcher goes so far as to claim that the state 'is the single most important social actor in the politics of race' (p4). I am not sure I would agree. Surely one of Cultural Studies' most important insights is that popular culture is *the* crucial site of political struggles and negotiations. Arguably Paul Gilroy's analysis of the *music culture* of 1980s Black Britain is what makes *There Ain't No Black In The Union Jack* such a classic intervention into the same field. If Pitcher had examined problematic media representations of British Muslims in the same period this would have yielded interesting insights that might support his thesis. Nevertheless, *The Politics of Multiculturalism* is a fascinating book that argues original perspectives so convincingly these immediately feel like common sense.

# IMAGINARY AMERICAS

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*Katherine Harrison*

Mark Rawlinson, *American Visual Culture*, Oxford and New York, Berg, 2009, 248pp; £17.99 paperback, £55 cloth

John Mraz, *Looking for Mexico: Modern Visual Culture and National Identity*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2009; 360pp; £15.99 paperback, £64 cloth

The burgeoning field of visual culture continues to yield interesting scholarly contributions, ranging from niche studies of specific visual texts to magisterial examinations of swathes of images broadly delineated by historical period, national context or medium of production. Two recent publications which locate themselves in the second category - Mark Rawlinson's *American Visual Culture* and John Mraz's *Looking for Mexico* - set out to examine the relationships between visual cultures and the formation of national identities in the contexts of, respectively, the USA during the twentieth century and Mexico since the 1840s, two theatres which are, as Mraz's book at least makes clear, historically, geographically, politically and economically interconnected.

Rawlinson and Mraz adopt similar methods of inquiry, constructing research archives from the vast array of still and moving images produced in each of their chosen national contexts. While both authors might be accused of cherry-picking images to fit their theses (a charge that is pre-empted in both introductions), it is apparent that the subjective, piecemeal approach to the analysis of visual culture is borne out by the nuanced insights it provides into what is generally understood as the social constructivist or discursive paradigm of national identity. Images considered by Rawlinson and Mraz include those created and circulated within the national borders of the USA and Mexico, as well as images from outside, produced in the contexts of wars or occupations. Thus, between them, the two books focus in on an impressive assortment of visual media, including photographs, paintings, illustrations, maps, print advertisements, postcards and films, which are argued - with varying levels of success - to have been crucial to the formation, contestation and renegotiation of American-ness and *mexicanidad* (Mexican-ness). For Rawlinson, this task is essential simply because, after the inauguration of what W.J.T. Mitchell has called 'the pictorial turn' in the Academy, images are problems to be engaged (pp6-9). More pragmatically, for Mraz, visual culture is key to understanding the construction of *mexicanidad* precisely because 'low literacy rates have traditionally created a culture of images more than of words' in Mexico (p2). Both texts can be seen as attempts to affirm the scope and value of the emergent area of visual cultural inquiry that has in one respect



already permeated much of the Academy yet, at the same time, still lacks a clear disciplinary identity and home within the departmental organisation of contemporary universities.

The title of Mark Rawlinson's *American Visual Culture* promises much, raising the reader's expectation of an ambitious analysis of a potentially infinite field of visual data, a promise which it is inevitably impossible to fulfil and leads the author to immediately repudiate his chosen title in the introduction. As Rawlinson explains, *American Visual Culture* is 'not able to offer an all-inclusive, complete reading of all aspects of American visual culture' and instead only 'aims to encourage and inspire readers to think about the issues raised ... and then research, explore, and discover for themselves aspects of American visual culture not included here' (p1). To further complicate matters, as Rawlinson is at pains to explain, both 'American' and 'Visual Culture' are contested terms, the former a problematic imperialist designation for the USA, and the latter a nascent discipline still testing its intellectual boundaries and methodologies. Whither, then, *American Visual Culture*?

Rawlinson's ostensible project is to 'analyze American visual culture - from maps to advertisements, from photographs of national parks to the covers of men's adventure magazines - and then articulate the ways in which each is in some way a reflection of American national identity' (p6), a category which Rawlinson acknowledges is imaginary, indistinct and the subject of much debate. Rawlinson sets about this task by constructing a series of case studies, each focusing on a different image or set of images on a theme, which are analysed using a variety of theoretical frameworks, including Saussure's semiotics, Barthes' myth, Mulvey's gaze and Foucault's panopticism. In doing so, *American Visual Culture* offers some interesting insights into under-scrutinized areas of twentieth-century visual culture such as landscape painting, lynching postcards, and pin-up calendars, although the book's strength does not lie in its theoretical contribution, since the straightforward application of the theory of the male gaze to representations of women in men's magazines and recourse to the Panopticon model to explain photography's claim to objectivity are well trodden ground. Indeed, the comprehensive nature of the explanation provided as an introduction to each theory that is utilised - even to the point of reproducing Saussure's well known diagrammatic representation of the sign (p58) and rehearsing, with examples, the concept of metonymy (p110) - establishes *American Visual Culture* as an introductory level initiation into some major theories germane to the analysis of visual culture in *any* national context, rather than a pointed intervention into contemporary debates about American-ness.

However, by concentrating on the elementary application of theory to visual texts, Rawlinson underplays one of the main points of interest of his book. Although he states that it is not his intention to 'recuperate buried material' but instead to focus on 'commonplace' images (p6), *American Visual Culture* does in fact examine a number of images produced in the

USA that have received little or no scholarly attention. For example, while Dorothea Lange's Depression era photograph *Migrant Mother* (1936) has been reproduced in several other recent studies of visual culture, the examples Rawlinson draws from the contemporaneous Midwestern 'regionalist' school of landscape painting have been less extensively treated and provide an interesting perspective on the role that representations of landscapes have played in the formation of ideas about the USA's rural heartland; the imaginary 'small-town America' (p36) that acts as 'a means of moral and spiritual sustenance' (p37) in times of national crisis.<sup>1</sup> (Rawlinson's short study of artists Grant Wood and Alexandre Hogue is particularly timely given the opening of major new exhibition, '1934: A New Deal for Artists,' at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, DC) It might therefore have made for a more original thesis if more space had been dedicated to careful close readings of these 'buried' images and conclusions drawn about the significance of their exclusion from the USA's iconic pantheon.

1. See, for example, Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture and Liberal Democracy*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2007.

*American Visual Culture* will be of interest to undergraduates and those new to visual studies. It works best when considered as a collection of essays, each elucidating the potential of visual cultural inquiry from a separate theoretical perspective. Every chapter includes a list of provocative questions regarding the potential conclusions that might be drawn from each case study as well as exhortations to the reader to go out and conduct research into aspects of the visual culture of the USA for herself. For the most part, this results in a thought-provoking induction into visual analysis; however, in places the conclusions to be drawn are not straightforward and yet Rawlinson leaves them hanging, often at the end of chapters, before moving on to pastures new. While pointing to directions for future research is a prudent strategy, leaving case studies so open-ended in an introductory volume is not entirely to be recommended. This is a weakness that is exacerbated by the absence of a concluding chapter to review and synthesise the separate studies. *American Visual Culture* contains the bones of an intriguing introduction to the links between images and American-ness and its encouraging register will lend itself well to set reading on undergraduate modules in visual culture or American Studies.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the publisher Berg has not done a thorough enough job in editing the manuscript for *American Visual Culture*. Particularly in the early chapters typing errors remain uncorrected and clauses are inexplicably duplicated. Although these problems do not persist throughout, the errors hamper the reading process precisely at the stage of the book where clarity is most required.

John Mraz's *Looking for Mexico* is intended for a more expert readership. The book asserts that the modern idea of *mexicanidad* - and thus contemporary Mexican national identity - has its origins in the generic conventions of certain forms of visual representation that dominated Mexico's documentary media in critical periods of the nation's history; periods during which 'the

question of *mexicanidad* was explicitly addressed' (p1). Examining some of the same visual forms that Rawlinson identifies as imperative to American-ness, but supplementing these with what are shown to be peculiarly Mexican visual media such as the *tarjeta de visita* (illustrated visiting card) and official *historias gráficas* (multi-volume photographic histories), Mraz argues that the production of Mexican visual culture during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was part of a strategy to create a unifying myth of nation which changed in relation to the dominant ideology of the ruling regime.

Mraz's strong and well sustained central thesis is mainly constructed around careful studies of the oeuvres of a succession of photographers who worked in Mexico either in collaboration with or in opposition to various political regimes and movements, such as Hugo Brehme, Tina Modotti, Winfield Scott, Guillermo Kahlo, Agustín Víctor Casasola and other, later, image-makers. Focusing on photographic representations of everything from *caudillos* (self-appointed Great Men) dictator Porfirio Díaz and revolutionary general Emiliano Zapata, for example and Spanish colonial architecture, to celebrities and cinematic portrayals of the artist Frida Kahlo, *Looking for Mexico* interweaves historical narrative with the story of the gradual emergence of a distinctive Mexican visual culture that has been consistently implicated in the social and political conflicts of the nation's last two centuries. Mraz shows how the visual formulation of *mexicanidad* was executed, taking in both the pre-revolutionary pastoral photographic 'Mexican types' produced initially to entice foreign tourism and investment, as well as the post-revolutionary idea of *lo mexicano* based in 1940s cinematic representations of modern national archetypes, such as the '*pachuco*' (a figure embodying the clash of US and Mexican cultures) and the 'long-suffering woman' (p120-121). Mraz also finds time to hint at fascinating side projects, such as the startling revelation that some nineteenth century photographers from the USA were implicated in a nascent child pornography trade which peddled images of young Mexican girls bathing nude or posing in revealingly ragged clothing to US viewers under the auspices of social realism (p36).

There are, however, some difficulties with *Looking for Mexico*. In several places in the text, Mraz refers uncritically to the picturesque aesthetic that dominated representations of Mexico in the nineteenth century as 'a ready-made stereotype of Orientalism' (see for example p3 and p27). Although the general point seems to be that photographs of spectacular cactus-speckled vistas peopled by quaint *campesinos* (rural peasants) and moustachioed *charros* (cowboys) constructed Mexico as an 'exotic' place in the imagination of foreign viewers, the unproblematic application of Said's theory about the discursive formation of the Middle East in Western media to the vastly different context of Mexico is surely not clear-cut and deserves further consideration. Notably, Said is not listed in the bibliography.

Additionally, in an enthusiastic attempt to assert the significance of the visual images he assays, Mraz at times strays into hyperbole and makes

claims that are as unsubstantiated as they are unlikely. One notable example of this concerns the argument that a photograph of Zapata dressed in *charro* costume, taken by Brehme in 1911, is 'an international revolutionary icon equalled only by [Alberto] Korda's famous image of Che Guevara as the "Heroic Guerrilla"' (p67). While the argument that these two images 'must be the most reproduced photographs from Latin America' (p67) may perhaps hold water, Korda's image of Che - a mainstay of international 'radical chic' famously reproduced on T-shirts, album covers, posters and mouse mats all over the world, and even the subject of the documentary film *Chevolution* in 2008 - surely outstrips the iconicity of Brehme's photo of Zapata on an unquantifiable scale.<sup>2</sup> These, however, are relatively minor issues which do little to detract from Mraz's confident and compelling thesis.

Mraz's analysis of visual texts is situated against the backdrop of Mexico's complex political and social history and will appeal to scholars in a range of disciplines with specialism in Latin American Studies, as well as to general readers interested in visual culture. A helpful glossary of Spanish terms is provided at the beginning of the book for readers unfamiliar with Mexican culture.

Both *American Visual Culture* and *Looking for Mexico* attest to the value and dynamism of contemporary visual cultural inquiry, a field that has no shortage of new primary material and unexplored archives, nor lack of enthusiasm from students and researchers to limit its scope.

2. See Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 2nd edn. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, pp.200-203. See also *Chevolution*, dir. Luis Lopez and Trisha Ziff, Mexico, 2008

# SELECTIVE HOSPITALITY

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*Felicia Chan*

David Harvey, *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2009, 352pp; £19.00 hardback

When David Harvey spoke at the official launch of the University of Manchester's Research Institute of Cosmopolitan Cultures (RICC) in March 2009, he mentioned the imminent publication of a book whose manuscript had been so pressed for by the publisher, that the author just submitted 'what [he] had'. The result, Harvey confessed only half in jest, is that 'there is no good answer at the end', no compelling solution to the problems of capitalism he has spent a career highlighting. That book is the one I am reviewing now, and while there may be no 'good answer' at the end, there are, it must be said, many good questions. In his latest volume, published as part of Columbia University Press' series on the Wellek Library Lectures, held annually at the Critical Theory Institute at the University of California, Irvine, Harvey continues to take on the injustices of neoliberalism by reframing the arguments for cosmopolitanism within a geographical context.

'Cosmopolitanism' is one of those impossibly utopian concepts over which everyone fights a claim to and then invariably apologises for not being able to attain its ideals, and discussions about cosmopolitanism inevitably give way to debates about cosmopolitics. Harvey's cosmopolitical project may thus be taken in two halves of the volume. The first is a literature review of sorts, beginning with an unpacking of Immanuel Kant's cosmopolitan ethics and ending with a warning against banalising geographical knowledge for simple political ends. The second half is a manifesto of sorts, arguing for a more judicious application of geography to global problems in order to tease out the specificities of culture and history within each locale.

In Part I, Harvey reads the limits of Kant's cosmopolitan ethics as a misapplication of geographical knowledge. In Kant's cosmopolitan ethos, each individual (*qua* citizen) has the automatic 'right to hospitality when they cross clearly defined borders' (p18). Yet, Kant's presumption of who this citizen may be is blatantly Eurocentric, describing many non-European peoples as indolent, untrustworthy, thieving, and so on. Harvey puzzles over how to reconcile Kantian ideals of a universal ethic promising perpetual peace and demonstrable hospitality with the clearly racist conceptualisation of who and what constitutes the community of people who make up the *cosmos*. As Harvey reads it:

Either [these inferior peoples must] reform themselves for the consideration under the universal ethical code (thereby flattening out all

kinds of geographical and cultural differences in favour of some normative definition of maturity), or the universal principles operate across different geographical conditions as an intensely discriminatory code masquerading as the universal good (p33).

Either way, geographical and cultural variations are seen to be tamed, and normalised according to certain Eurocentric standards. Harvey applies this argument in the subsequent chapters to explain the British colonisation of India, in which ‘Hindus were invited to submit to the logic of the maps the British had made of them, to abandon all sense of their own history, and to take on that “structure of feeling” that every true-born Englishman was supposed to possess’ (p48).

Similarly, neo-liberalism continues to ‘flatten’ the world according to its own market rationalist principles through the discourse of ‘globalisation’. By default, cultures and societies subject to the logic of neoliberalisation ‘give up on the necessity to “unpack” what that force is about, where it comes from, who is promoting it, and for what reasons’ (p57-58). Neoliberalism, Harvey argues, ‘has created a flat world for the multinational corporations and for the billionaire entrepreneur and investor class, but a rough, jagged, and uneven world for everyone else’ (p58). That neoliberalism exacerbates geographical inequalities is evident, but Harvey takes it as far as to argue that even those committed to eradicating its injustices, such as NGOs and advocacy movements, become subsumed within its voracious cycle.

If a cosmopolitan ethos is to do its best work and fulfil its highest aspirations - which may be abbreviated as the celebration of difference as unthreatening - it must operate within ‘geographical and anthropological conditionalities’ (p121), rather than attempt to eradicate their differences, or impose on those differences an overarching ‘one-size-fits-all’ model for action. Indeed, if cosmopolitan theories are not to be banalised - and cannibalised - by the discourses of neoliberalism, where differences are acknowledged only to be marketed to while perpetuating the myth of borderless worlds, then we must re-frame our understanding of *space-time*.

Harvey’s call for a re-imagining of space is borne out of the understanding of ‘space as materially sensed, conceptualised, and lived’ (p134) as opposed to spatial abstractions imposed on individuals and societies by neoliberal rationalisation. He also calls for a re-imagining of time as an internalised process relative to lived experience rather than an absolute one. To actively acknowledge these differences is, to use just one example, to acknowledge that ‘the spatio-temporal rhythms of capital accumulation’ may be radically different from ‘that required to understand global climate change’ (p136). And then there is the issue of trying to represent ‘the immaterial spatio-temporality of, say, social and power relations’ (p139). While Harvey has no specifics (yet) to offer, it is not too far-fetched to relate his arguments to, say, the exigencies of higher education funding in the UK, so subject as it is

now, not just to the cycles of the global economy, but also to national election cycles, the demographics of international student migration, and so on.

To be cosmopolitan in some ways suggests a transcendence of such cycles, the promise of mobility and mutual understanding implying a freedom from the limits of geography and the myopia of the past. Yet in order for cosmopolitanism to not simply descend into bourgeois tourism, to be properly 'cosmopolitan', in Harvey's terms, begins with the acknowledgement of 'cosmopolitanism' as a radical politics that engages uneven geographies, not as imperfections to be levelled out, but as conditions out of which a more 'emancipatory and liberatory form of global governance' (p14) may emerge.

# SITUATING THE SITUATIONISTS

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*Sam Cooper*

Guy Debord, translated by Stuart Kendall and John McHale, *Correspondence: The Foundation of the Situationist International (June 1957-August 1960)*, London, Semiotext(e), 2009, 397pp; £12.95 paperback

Tom McDonough (ed), *The Situationists and the City: A Reader*, London, Verso, 2010, 256pp; £14.99 paperback, £65 cloth

Recuperation, the process whereby an oppositional position is assimilated into that which it opposes, remained something of an aporia within Situationist theory. Recuperation was deemed inevitable and unavoidable; even the most radical critique of capitalism could be ideologically rewritten and then incorporated into what Guy Debord called the society of the spectacle. The Situationist International (SI) was aware that its own work would face the same fate, and it is true that many Situationist concepts have been defused and accepted into institutional discourses around art, architecture and urbanism. Through the recuperation of the SI, a popular characterisation of the group has emerged which consigns its historical role to a vague involvement in May '68 and reduces its theoretical contribution to a handful of signature concepts. This recuperated SI can then be conveniently filed away with their spectacle alongside, say, Baudrillard and his simulacra and McLuhan and his global village.

This state of affairs, in the Anglophone world at least, has been due in part to the uneven appearance of English translations of Situationist texts. Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) and Raoul Vaneigem's *Revolution of Everyday Life* (1967) have come to form the twin pillars of Situationist work: Debord representing its dense Hegelian theory and Vaneigem its more affective calls for quotidian insurrection. Yet both of these texts were produced ten years into the SI's fifteen-year existence, after it had shifted away from aesthetic production and cultural intervention and moved towards a more theoretical critique of contemporary life. Although Debord and Vaneigem's texts address many of the concepts that the SI had been developing over the previous decade, these were mostly synthesised and subsumed into the total theory of the spectacle. The disproportionate amount of attention paid to these two texts over the rest of the SI's oeuvre not only beatifies Debord and Vaneigem, but also overlooks the fact that *Society of the Spectacle* and *The Revolution of Everyday Life* present only two interpretations of a long period of experimentation, disagreement and tension, from which different conclusions may yet be reached. The English publication of Guy Debord's *Correspondence: The Foundation of the Situationist International (June 1957-August*



1960) and McDonough's collection *The Situationists and the City* both revisit the SI pre-1967 and render more fully the eclipsed image of the SI that now so frequently circulates. *Correspondence* reveals the tactical discussions and organisational machinations carried on by Debord during the SI's first three years; *The Situationists and the City* brings together a range of texts and images which demonstrate the lasting importance of urbanism even to the SI's most abstract and speculative theory.

The texts that McDonough includes in *The Situationists and the City* are drawn from members of the SI and their contributions to the SI's journal, *Internationale Situationniste*, as well as from proximate figures who informed the SI's thinking of the urban, most notably Henri Lefebvre. McDonough's introduction provides a remarkably fresh and unbagged perspective on the SI's chronology, and identifies seven periods of Situationist urbanism. These begin prior to the formation of the SI with the Lettrist International and its reading of the city as informed by interwar Surrealism's insistence on passion and desire. McDonough asks us to consider the SI's development thereafter as a movement towards a 'Hegelian urbanism' (p3) for which the city is a space of self-consciousness, collective recognition and eventually revolutionary becoming. As McDonough argues, 'From being the site of alienated labour and passive consumption, the city was reformulated as the locus of a potential reciprocity and community, the crucial spatial stake of any project of radical social transformation' (p3).

Gilles Ivain's 1953 Lettrist text, 'Formulary for a New Urbanism', cast a long shadow over the SI's engagement with the urban. Ivain decried the formalism of modernist architecture embodied by Le Corbusier as boring and joyless. He demanded instead an urbanism that provoked the imagination and brought to light the forgotten desires of its inhabitants. A new urbanism, Ivain prophesied, might divide cities into themed neighbourhoods, such as Bizarre, Happy and Sinister Quarters, as well as producing 'houses where one cannot help but love' (p38). Future city-dwellers would live in a permanent state of *dérive*, which at this point was defined as a practice of moving freely through urban space whilst simultaneously and subjectively reconfiguring social space. Ivain's sprawling and eccentric text set the tone for much of the SI's early discussion of the urban, whereby the principal consideration for imagining another city was the *dérive* and its associated discipline of psychogeography, combined with notions of free play and ludic creativity drawn from Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938).

Around 1960, however, the *dérive* was supplanted by and incorporated into the concept of unitary urbanism, which the SI was keen to promote as their method of urbanism and a total critique of architecture, infrastructure and social space. A number of articles included in this collection insist on the primacy of unitary urbanism to the SI's programme, yet their explications are divergent and the principles of unitary urbanism remain vague. As McDonough's introduction notes, we are left uncertain as to whether this is a

pre- or post-revolutionary practice, whether unitary urbanism is a technique to disrupt the capitalist city or a mode of living in a future, Situationist, city. This distinction remained problematic to the SI, as demonstrated in its difficulty to uphold a distinction between its programme as experimental rather than Utopian. For example, the Dutch architect and Situationist known only as Constant developed and modelled a future city called New Babylon in which the partitioning of the physical space could be endlessly reorganised to promote a disorienting and de-alienating engagement with the urban environment. Although the SI initially promoted New Babylon as a work of unitary urbanism, frictions arose between Constant and Debord as the former became increasingly concerned with the technical problems of realising his models, at the cost of sidelining the more esoteric demands of unitary urbanism.

Constant resigned from the SI in 1960, following the expulsion of the rest of the SI's Dutch section for accepting a commission to design a church. Thereafter, the SI's urbanism would shift away from visionary model-making, concrete proposals and the planning of the Situationist city to come and towards a reading of contemporary urbanism as the concretisation of alienation, periods marked by McDonough as the SI's 'Architectural Interlude' and its 'Critique of Urban Planning' respectively. The SI deemed the modern city, and especially the New Town, to normalise and maintain the processes of consumption, routine and passivity which were the alienated bases of contemporary life. At the same time, the SI was also exploring what possible role it could adopt in revolutionising this alienated urbanism in favour of an alternative based on 'total communication' (p165). One form of resistance, the SI argued, was the festival, as a source of disruption, subversion and anarchic play. The two most assured texts in this collection, exemplary applications of Situationist theory to historical moments, are readings of the Paris Commune ('On the Commune') and the 1965 Watts Riots ('The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy') as instances of urban festival, when everyday life was, albeit briefly, experienced anew.

McDonough's collection provides a welcome diachronic account of the different periods of Situationist activity. We see, for example, how an unassuming practice such as the *dérive* became theorised into a total urbanist method which was then itself abstracted into the grander theory of the spectacle. *Correspondence* is not organised into a narrative arc, but arranges chronologically Debord's letters from the founding of the SI in 1957 to its fourth conference in London in September 1960. This period is roughly equivalent to that which McDonough labelled the SI's period of 'Consolidation', when Debord had to hand most of the specialised terms and concepts of the SI's critique, and needed to establish the SI's role, programme and internal organisation. The period of *Correspondence* also culminates with Constant's aforementioned resignation, prompted by the SI's shift from positivist imaginings to ruthless critique.

In asserting urbanism's paradigmatic relevance even when the SI were no longer speaking explicitly about the urban environment, McDonough's collection offers a productive revision of the Situationist programme. *Correspondence* demands a similar reconsideration, this time of the SI's group formation and internal power structure. McKenzie Wark's introduction positions Debord as a middleman who managed not only the SI's critical development, but also its more banal, practical, duties: conferences, printing of the journal, the maintenance of contact with Situationists overseas. Debord's subsequent rise to prominence as representative of the SI was due not only to the exposure of *Society of the Spectacle* and his own self-promotion, but to his tactical ability to maintain a position in the centre of a complex network of Situationist thinkers. During the period covered by *Correspondence*, the Italian artist Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio, Constant and veteran avant-gardist Asger Jorn were the three figures with whom Debord maintained dialogues, though by 1961 only Jorn remained a member of the SI. Wark's introduction indicates that the early development of the SI may be (re)read as a power struggle between Debord, Gallizio, Constant and Jorn, and whilst these letters demonstrate Debord's oft-cited mercilessness regarding the revolutionary discipline of SI members, we also see his more personable side when dealing with figures like Gallizio whom he clearly, if only temporarily, held in high esteem. In February 1958, Debord addresses Gallizio as his 'great and noble friend' (p82) and offers advice on an upcoming exhibition. By June 1960, Debord writes to Constant to inform him of Gallizio's 'sickening *arrivisme*' (p356) and subsequent expulsion from the SI. Regarding the expulsion, Debord forebodingly informs Constant of his belief that 'there are moments at which it is necessary to know how to choose' (p356).

Debord's self-assuredness and absolutist sense of discipline are characteristics that have been projected onto the SI itself, aided by a continued project of self-mythologisation evidenced in a letter from Debord to Jorn in September 1957 in which Debord suggests that 'a new legend must be created immediately around us' (p46). If we want to move beyond an eclipsed impression of the SI, we must now counteract its own tactic of self-mythologisation and recover the aspects of its history and programme lost in both Debord's single-mindedness and five decades of recuperation. To demythologise the Situationists is to act against their reification into pop stars of radical politics and reveal what might still be unexplored in their project. *Correspondence* and *The Situationists and the City* both explode myths which have developed around the SI. In reading Debord's letters, we recognise how he positioned himself as a manager (or, in Wark's term, 'secretary') of the SI and was thus able to organise the SI's self-image from its very beginnings. McDonough's collection, likewise, situates the Situationists: by acknowledging the contributions of Situationists other than Debord and Vaneigem, McDonough contextualises the SI within broader currents of critical urbanism.

There are, unfortunately, notable lacunae in both collections, some of which could not be helped. *Correspondence* lacks Debord's letters to his partner Michèle Bernstein and his lover Michèle Mochot-Bréhat, both of whom refused to allow Debord's second wife Alice Becker-Ho to include them in the collection. Although he does include some of the SI's visual productions, McDonough's collection displays a slight bias towards Situationist texts, so an important document like Ralph Rumney's 'Psychogeographical Map of Venice' is not included. Nonetheless, *Correspondence* and *The Situationists and the City* may yet illuminate aspects of the SI's history that contain alternative possibilities to those with which we are now perhaps over-familiar. These publications and the counter-narratives they contain may reanimate the warning of the SI's manifesto which was presented at its London conference in 1960: "To those who don't understand us properly, we say with an irreducible scorn: "The situationists of whom you believe yourselves perhaps to be the judges, will one day judge you".