

# AUTONOMOUS OBJECTS

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*Graham Harman*

Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things*, Durham, North Carolina, Duke University Press, 2010; 200pp, £14.99 paperback.

Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* is an admirable book for at least three reasons. First, it is wonderfully written in a comfortable personal style, which is rare enough for academic books. Second, Bennett makes an explicit break with the timeworn dogmas of postmodernist academia. She bids farewell to the continental platitudes of recent decades: the social construction of the real, and a dominant human subject cloaked in the alibi of language. In place of these tattered garments she gives us 'thing-power', and from this new autonomy of things much follows. Better yet, Bennett repeatedly avoids the half-measure of saying that things 'resist us with their recalcitrance', that disappointing manoeuvre which leaves humans in command while merely haunting them with a vague letter X beyond their grasp. The third point that makes this book admirable is Bennett's professional position: Chair of Political Science at Johns Hopkins University. That someone in a Political Science department at an important university could write as candid a work of metaphysics as *Vibrant Matter* is an encouraging sign. Perhaps philosophical speculation on fundamental topics is poised for a comeback throughout the humanities.

Bennett's twelve-page preface has a certain freshness to it, and serves as a fine overture to the chapters that follow. What she seeks is a 'vital materiality' or 'material vitalism' sharing more in common with childhood naïveté than with the aloof critique that one normally adopts as a basic intellectual stance. This leads her to oppose a Hegel-Marx-Adorno axis of 'historical materialism' that tends to 'follow the trail of power to expose social hegemonies' (pxiii). Instead, Bennett empowers the non-human world, dropping the tedious opposition between active humans and inanimate things. This leads her to endorse an alternate materialist axis of Democritus-Epicurus-Spinoza-Diderot-Deleuze. This may seem too close for comfort to Deleuze's own pantheon of favoured thinkers (I will return to this issue later). Nonetheless, Bennett's preface contains a flurry of insights. The usual tool of the intellectual is demystification, and for Bennett it must be used with caution, since 'demystification assumes that at the heart of any event or process lies a *human* agency that has illicitly been projected into things' (pxiv). Things do not just obstruct human action, but have an inherent liveliness that allows them to act in the world at large, not just on us. And finally, in a stirring declaration: 'I will emphasize, even overemphasize, the agentic contributions of nonhuman forces.... in an attempt to counter the narcissistic reflex of human language

and thought' (pxvi). The usual charge against those who describe inanimate things as actors is 'anthropomorphism', yet Bennett answers convincingly that anthropomorphism may be needed in order to counter anthropocentrism.

Chapter One, 'The Force of Things,' develops another key insight as Bennett defines her concept of 'vibrant matter'. It is meant to replace the half-hearted realism that views the world as 'recalcitrance' or 'resistance'. For if it is conceded that even cultural constructions such as gender or nationality can resist our attempts to reshape them, this does not go far enough. The role of reality is not just to obstruct and perplex the human *cogito*, since objects affect one another even when humans are not watching. This step alone is enough to give value to Bennett's book, since it shatters the dominant human-world couplet that Quentin Meillassoux's 2006 book *After Finitude* described as 'correlationism'. This divides Bennett from her Johns Hopkins colleague Hent de Vries, who proposes a recalcitrant absolute beyond human knowledge (p3) and even from Theodor Adorno, whose *Negative Dialectics* does bow before the unmasterable reality beyond concepts, but who is 'quick—too quick from the point of view of the vital materialist—to remind the reader that objects are always "entwined" with human subjectivity' (p16). Bennett's 'vibrant matter' marks a step beyond such a humanized absolute-for-us. For things are 'never exhausted by their semiotics' (p5), and matter is not just 'intractable' but also includes 'the ability to make things happen, to produce effects' (p5).

The title of Chapter Two, 'The Agency of Assemblages', can be read as a nod to Manuel DeLanda, one of Bennett's rare fellow travellers on the path of continental *realism*. The ultimate sources of the term 'assemblage', of course, are Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who along with Spinoza are the major historical referents of this chapter. The concept is used to provide an interesting account of the American electrical blackout of 2003. Whereas the term 'thing' sounds fixed and stable (p20), 'assemblage' evokes Spinoza, for whom any specific thing is a mode of the one substance called 'God or Nature' (pp21-22). This nature is not a global organic unity but a vibrant amalgam of parts (p23). In one sense the assemblage is more than its pieces, since 'the effects generated by an assemblage are ... emergent properties, emergent in that their ability to make something happen ... is distinct from the sum of vital force of each materiality considered alone' (p24). Yet at the same time, 'precisely because each member-actant has a pulse slightly "off" from that of the assemblage, [it] is never a stolid block but an open-ended collective, a "non-totalizable sum"' (p24). The model of assemblages also leads Bennett to question the usual model of causation as a matter of individual agents in isolation from all else (p32). The assemblage allows Bennett to distance herself still further from the paralyzing human-world dyad that she finds again (correctly) in Maurice Merleau-Ponty and his advocate Diana Coole (p30), since for them as for Adorno the world remains entwined with the human and never gains full independence. But this very polemic makes

it all the more puzzling when Bennett praises Jacques Derrida's 'messianicity' for its turn toward the outside (p32), especially given her earlier critique of de Vries's similar notion of the absolute. At the close of the chapter, Bennett raises the intriguing ethical question of what follows from the assemblage. For it seems to imply a distributive concept of agency spread over a vast multitude of actors (p38), and this calls into question any moralistic ascription of right and wrong to individuals.

Chapter Three, 'Edible Matter', takes a remarkably concrete turn toward questions of diet. Bennett's material vitalism is no ivory tower philosophy. Like a wise friend concerned for our welfare, she cautions us against the memory-stunting effects of hydrogenated fats (p41) and scorns the industrialized berries found in Pop-Tarts (p47). Bennett's ontology is also perhaps the first to make room for potato chips: 'In the case of ... potato chips, it seems appropriate to regard the hand's actions as only quasi- or semi-intentional, for the chips themselves seem to call forth, or provoke and stoke, the manual labor'. And further: 'To eat chips is to enter into an assemblage in which the I is not necessarily the most decisive operator' (p40). At the same time, she praises the omega-3 fatty acids found in wild fish as mood enhancers, using national depression statistics to bolster her views. Bennett's point is that eating does not mean conquering raw material and assimilating it to ourselves, as Leon Kass holds (p47). Instead, the food-actors with which we engage constitute our individuality, as endorsed by the two contrasting models of Nietzsche with his 'warrior food' (p44) and Thoreau with his view of meat as unclean (p46). This entire chapter shows Bennett's talent for spinning philosophical gold out of everyday wool. After reading this chapter, you will find yourself wanting to eat more healthily: but for ontological reasons rather than the usual medical ones.

Chapter Four, 'A Life of Metal,' is perhaps the least developed in the book. Bennett's main point seems to be that a metal is what it can *do*, not what it *is* (p60). But despite the chapter's title, metal is discussed for only three of its ten pages. Another problem here is that Bennett's normally strong authorial voice is drowned out by that of Deleuze, and we hear Bennett speak in such non-Bennettian language as this: 'a vibratory effluence that persists before and after any arrangement in space: the peculiar "motility" of an intensity' (p57). Or this: 'an interstitial field of non-personal, ahuman forces, flows, tendencies, and trajectories' (p61). At other moments Bennett negotiates the Deleuzian influence with greater success: 'a life is not only a negative recalcitrance but a positive, active virtuality: a quivering protoblob of creative élan' (p61). And at still other times her own voice returns in force: 'The line of travel of these cracks [in metal] is not deterministic but expressive of an emergent causality, whereby grains respond on the spot and in real time to the idiosyncratic movements of their neighbors'. (p59)

Chapter Five, 'Neither Vitalism Nor Mechanism', delivers on its promising title with fresh ideas likely to stick in the reader's mind. Repeating her

powerful claim that the inhuman has a life of its own and does not exist only to obstruct human will (p62), Bennett turns to the vitalist theories of Henri Bergson and Hans Driesch (p63). It is not a matter of naively collecting false allies: Bennett openly notes that Bergson and Driesch both agree that matter is lifeless and mechanistic (p69), while she does not agree at all: '[This] association of matter with passivity still haunts us today ... weakening our discernment of the force of things' (p65). Bennett's boldness in walking alone is displayed further in her willingness to challenge Kant, that giant of modern philosophy. For Kant the vital principle in the *Critique of Judgment* is merely regulative and can never be directly encountered (p66); for Bennett, however, mechanism is no less inscrutable (p67). For Kant there is a quantum leap in reality from nature to humans; for Bennett, the world is made up of fine gradations of experience (p68), a claim linking her with Whitehead. Here, a Latourian sensitivity to the emptiness of the human-world duality is combined with a Heideggerian vision of reality withdrawing from human grasp. This should only be celebrated. But Bennett proceeds to a further deduction that I find less compelling. Namely, she approvingly cites Bergson's view that 'a world of fixed entities' is a 'distortion.... necessary and useful because humans must use the world instrumentally if they are to survive in it', and laments that we 'view the world as if it consisted not of an ever-changing flow of time but of a calculable set of things' (p77). In a related point, Bennett celebrates the Bergsonian *élan vital* for being a source of surprise beneath all the specific bodies it organizes. Now as before, this is aimed against the notion of individual things as having causal agency: 'the means available to *élan vital* do not preexist.... the moment of their deployment, but rather emerge in tandem with their effects' (p78). And further: 'as self-dispensing, *élan vital* is profoundly at odds with itself' (pp79-80). In short, Bennett's initial enemies are (a) the robotic human-world gap of modern philosophy and (b) the pairing of an inscrutable vital principle with calculable bland matter. But she then pivots into an attack on (c) the very viability of individual things and (d) the notion of discrete causal agents. The problem is that points (c) and (d) need not result from points (a) and (b). In my view this is the wrong choice on Bennett's part, as will be argued at the close of this review.

Chapter Six, 'Stem Cells and the Culture of Life', applies the results of Chapter Five to recent political events. Bennett makes the interesting claim that the 'culture of life' represented by Catholics and evangelicals, and by politicians such as George W. Bush and Tom DeLay, is in fact a kind of vitalism in which the divine spark of life is opposed to bland inert matter. With this form of vitalism she contrasts Driesch's and her own: 'unlike that evangelical vitalism, the "critical," "modern," or "scientific" vitalism of Driesch pairs an *affirmation* of non-material agencies (entelechies) at work in nature with an *agnosticism* about the existence of any supernatural agency' (p84). This identification of the tacit evangelical metaphysics is interesting enough. What makes it even more interesting is the parallel consideration, unstated

by Bennett, that there should be agnosticism not just about any supernatural agency, but about any *natural* agency as well: a point often forgotten by the scientific metaphysics that has recently begun to appear even in continental circles.

Chapter Seven, 'Political Ecologies', makes fascinating use of Darwin, Dewey, and Latour against the human-centred politics of Jacques Rancière. Darwin and Latour are linked here through their respective meditations on worms. Darwin notes the importance of worms in fertilizing the earth and gradually burying objects for archaeologists to find. Latour encounters worms in the specific case of an advancing patch of Amazon jungle, as described in his famous chapter of *Pandora's Hope*. This intertwining of human and non-human is bolstered further by Dewey's marvellous point in *Art as Experience* that some things inside our body are foreign to us (bacteria, drugs, implants) while some things lying outside our body are intimate parts of us (hometowns, friends, family). While inhuman objects need not be granted equal political rights (p104) all are potential elements of a political public (p102). This separates Bennett from Rancière (and, by implication, from Alain Badiou). While Bennett appreciates Rancière's notion of politics as a disruption of the ordinary, 'his description of the [political] act increasingly takes on a linguistic cast.... It is an "objection to a wrong", where a wrong is defined as the unequal treatment of beings who are equally endowed with a capacity for *human* speech' (p106). Bennett even reports a public exchange with Rancière after a talk in London, when she asked him openly about nonhuman political actors. 'Rancière said no: he did not want to extend the concept of the political that far; nonhumans do not qualify as participants in a demos' (p106). If it remains unclear how we would go about letting nonhumans be political actors, it seems clear enough that any politics based on a bad ontology of human-versus-world will reach bad political conclusions.

Chapter Eight, 'Vitality and Self-Interest', sums up many of the book's conclusions and adds some final observations. The writing also takes on especial lyrical power in these concluding pages: 'I am a material configuration, the pigeons in the park are material compositions, the viruses, parasites, and heavy metals in my flesh and in pigeon flesh are materialities, as are neurochemicals, hurricane winds, E. coli, and the dust on the floor' (p112). In a time when 'embodiment' is often still viewed as a stirring philosophical breakthrough, Bennett pushes things a needed step further: 'In a world of vibrant matter, it is not enough to say that we are "embodied". We are, rather, *an array of bodies*, many different kinds of them in a nested set of microbiomes' (pp112-113). While accepting Latour's argument against separating pure nature from pure culture, Bennett makes the excellent point that Latour may be too quick in abandoning the inspirational power of nature as a means of resetting our failed human concepts (p121). Bennett ends the book with a series of acknowledgments of the figures she views as among the chief forerunners of her position: Spinoza, Whitehead, Serres, and Deleuze.

Substance remains too static a notion, despite Spinoza's different use of the term, since nature 'operates not in the service of a pre-given end but for the sake of itself as process' (p118). Anything that acts 'has already entered an agentic assemblage' (p121). In referring to her own prose, Bennett stresses her need to choose the appropriate *verbs* (p119), as if she were less interested in nouns and their 'static' tendencies. With a wonderfully irreverent flourish, she ends the book with a four-sentence 'Nicene Creed,' whose first two sentences give a sufficient flavour of the whole: 'I believe in one matter-energy, the maker of things seen and unseen. I believe that this pluriverse is traversed by heterogeneities that are continually *doing things*' (p122).

We may be at a turning point in continental philosophy: a moment when the increasingly sterile human-world couplet is losing legitimacy as the pillar of our discipline. In nearly every case where key issues are touched upon in *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett makes a fresh choice. We have seen that Bennett avoids the typical, futile half-measure of saying that the human subject is not all-powerful but meets with resistance from the world. Instead, she proposes that philosophy treat the relations between things as no different in kind from those between human and thing, and in this way she tacitly encroaches on the terrain of the natural sciences. The old correlation of 'man and world' is dissolved, as all human and inhuman actors are placed on the same footing: atoms and stones are no less inscrutable than *élan vital* or the death drive. And here one can only applaud. Yet it is less clear why dissolving the artificial gap between human and world as kinds of beings entails that we need to challenge the existence of individual things altogether. Instead of simply placing flowers, armies, Italians, Chinese, radios, and hurricanes on the same ontological footing by dissolving the rift between people and things, Bennett also wants to dissolve the rift that divides any given thing from any other. Ultimately, what is real in her new Nicene Creed is a pluriverse not of many things, but of 'one matter-energy' that is 'traversed by heterogeneities'. The danger for Bennett, as for Deleuze and Deleuze's Spinoza, is that objects are liberated from slavery to the human gaze only to fall into a new slavery to a single 'matter-energy' that allows for no strife between autonomous individual things. Although it is true that Deleuze rescued us in the mid-1990s from an endless repetition of text-centred philosophies, it is less clear in 2011 whether he remains the liberator we need. For this reader at least, Bennett resembles DeLanda in being most interesting when she *departs* from Deleuze most markedly.

# ENTRENCHED MEDIA

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*Rainer Emig*

Friedrich Kittler, *Optical Media: Berlin Lectures 1999*, Anthony Enns (trans), Cambridge and Malden, MA, Polity Press, 2009, 250 pp, £17.99 paperback.

It is no coincidence that the English-speaking Humanities are discovering Friedrich Kittler almost twenty years after his writings caused a stir in the German-speaking world. His ostensibly anti-Humanist approach to literature and culture chimes with the recent fashion for supposedly post-humanist forms of thinking. At the same time, his early and comprehensive interest in the media not as mere by-products of cultural transformations, but as their trigger and core supplements Media Studies as a discipline that has to a large extent become the victim of its own success in academia and the public perception. There, his radically materialist thinking appears like a breath of fresh air - even when it is a blast from the past.

John Durham Peters' useful Introduction to Anthony Enns very readable translation of Kittler's 1999 lectures on optical media, situates Kittler's thinking neatly in opposition to Adorno and Horkheimer's offhand rejection of the modern mass media in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and connects it, equally plausibly, with Foucault's thinking in terms of discursive formations and their disruptions. This affinity also affected the problematic translation of Kittler's groundbreaking study *Aufschreibesysteme* of 1985 (literally: Systems of Notation) as *Discourse Networks*. Already in this polemical revision and radical expansion of Kittler's original field of German Literary Studies, the materiality and technology of the media of notation triumphs over attempts to link the resulting texts to the old Humanist chestnuts of genius or inspiration. His lectures on optical media, fourteen years on, attempt a similar feat, this time for the whole of Western Culture.

This claim for universality accounts for much of the appeal of the lectures. It also produces many equally irritating areas of vagueness, contradictoriness, and sheer pig-headedness. Peters' Introduction wisely labels Kittler's approach 'media philosophy'. Kittler himself, in his lectures, rejects both traditional literature-based Media Studies and context-based sociological Media Studies as waffle and gossip. He freely admits that he does not watch many films and kicks off his lecture by apologizing for the absence of Powerpoint, since he is unable to connect his laptop and the data projector. In contrast to the textual and contextual jumble of methods that amounts to Media Studies, Kittler's general premise is anthropological and as simple as it is convincing. Human culture has traditionally chosen most of its symbols in the sphere of the visual. Consequently, if one uses a broad definition of media, most of human culture

has functioned via visual media, from the ancient Greeks' idea of the soul via Medieval notions of God's presence (or absence) to Enlightenment's emphasis on illumination and the counter-Reformation's use of spectacle - all the way to nineteenth- and twentieth-century contributions to media apparatuses in the shape of the photographic camera, film, TV and ultimately digital media.

In order to achieve such a wide sweep in his argument, Kittler obviously has to rely on other sources, most noticeably Friedrich von Zglinicki's rather traditional late 1970s history of film. Yet he manages to give them his own twist. Especially the chapters on early visual media, such as the *camera obscura*, are full of exciting insights. There, Kittler manages to develop his strictly materialist media philosophy that tries to discursively relate changes in human perception and self-definition with media change. He also manages to add, mostly convincingly, his second major hobby-horse: war. Most innovations in optical media were (at least also) used in warfare, if they did not originate in it. When metaphorically applied to the counter-Reformation and to issues such as the *deus ex machina* and Absolutism, Kittler's ideas achieve their greatest stimulating force.

Conversely, Kittler's lectures lose much of their fascinating pull when he goes past his climactic historic scenario, the First World War. There, media and war technology as well as the technological innovations in transport and communication technology that gave us the modern world - and Modernism as an artistic response to it - can be traced in their closest analogies and collaborations. Such parallels and interfaces become lost, and the arguments of Kittler's lectures somewhat tired and repetitive, when he reaches the Second World War. Why this should have been the war of colour film remains enigmatic. Only because the Nazi propaganda machine produced light entertainment fare in coloured images? Kittler's lectures took place before the discovery of allied war documentary film in colour, but until now our image of this war has been a black-and-white one, and this was certainly true for the people who had to live through it. Kittler is equally weak on the introduction of sound into film, and has almost nothing to say on television that goes beyond the by now well-matured theses of Marshall McLuhan, who, together with Harold Innes, is his most reliable ally. In fact Kittler repeats McLuhan's problematic dictum that the content of a medium is always an old medium at least three times - without realising that this only seemingly adds stability to his universalist enterprise. 1999 was also clearly too early to make any meaningful predictions about HD television (Kittler nonetheless bravely claims that this new technology spells the end of celluloid-based film). It would have been early enough, though, to make more sensible pronouncements on digital media than the reductively apocalyptic claim that 'visible optics must disappear into a black hole of circuits' (p225). Here the conservative pessimism of Kittler's old nemesis Adorno and Horkheimer catches up with him.

Apart from the perhaps understandable fact that a book of such sweep



cannot be strong in all its parts, the two greatest reservations about Kittler's method derive indeed from his anti-Humanism. 'Man' or 'Mankind' are no-go-areas for Kittler, and one might feel sympathy for his avoidance of essentialist premisses that underly many simplistic sociological forms of Media Studies. Yet where does reception come into Kittler's mechanistic universe? Where is the role of the imagination that enables people from different historical eras and cultural locations (Kittler is traditional concerning the former and ignorant concerning the latter) to perceive the same optical phenomenon as having very different meanings? Ultimately, his strictly materialist view of one medium passing on its content to another leaves the issue of users, their preconceptions and interests, aside. It also bypasses the important question of agency. Why does media change take place? Kittler's method of interlinked historical anecdotes that all reveal the same teleology of intimately connected media- and war-interests only replaces the traditional creation and progress myths with a ghost in the machine.

Despite these serious reservations, Kittler's lectures provide stimulating and provocative reading. They are certainly not suitable as introductory material, but can be profitably employed to attack stale opinions and open the view for a wider integration of the media into our histories of culture and knowledge - with or without human agency or interest at their core.

# PRECARIOUS, POINTILLIST

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*Deborah Staines*

Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, London and New York, Verso, 2009.

In 2006, Judith Butler visited Sydney, and gave a public lecture in a modern recital hall strikingly panelled with blonde Australian timber and gold leaf. The street address - Angel Place - added a delicious irony, as did the gift of dripping red flowers, and altogether the sense of occasion expressed the high esteem in which Butler is held worldwide. There, Butler chose not to recap her popular and influential philosophies of gender, as she might easily have done and instead spoke intently about being an American citizen during the Abu Ghraib abuses. Butler's increasingly direct contribution to international affairs seemed then to mark the passing of so many of the late twentieth century's major thinkers - Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard, Said - whose intellectual company she had kept, and who had written in resistance to the offences of political violence. With her homeland launching an apparently limitless war on Others, Butler has responded with critiques of statist political culture.

Following *Precarious Life* (2004), *Frames of War* reflects this commitment, bringing together five essays written and revised between 2004-08. Appropriately, Butler notes that she is writing in response to the contemporary situation - *Frames* is neither treatise nor transhistorical narrative. However, it is concerned with epistemological and ontological problems that are more than incidental. The 'frames' under consideration are Western cultural structures of recognition and of knowledge. Butler demonstrates how such frames shape the representation of war, circumscribe war's meaning, and efface violence's affect. Further, she links these epistemological issues to post-structuralist understandings of socially constructed ontologies, to conclude that in these wars, Others become 'ungrievable' casualties. This paradigm is also explored across a number of other topics including abortion, sexuality, torture, and religion. Thus, the book elaborates an existential politic that Butler locates in the 'precarity' of life. The immediate context is the US-initiated conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, but Butler aims to contribute an insight applicable to many debates about violence and the human.

Certainly, Butler brings an unimpeachable degree of ethics to writing on war. Her position of responsiveness is reclaimed from its current military overuse, and brought back to Foucault's reflexive *ethos*, to self conduct amidst cultures of domination and atrocity. War's destructiveness has a compelling gravity that attracts and challenges the writer; but its pitiless light also exposes weakness. Butler does not wield the eloquence of Simone Weil or the practicality of Mary Kaldor, for comparison. At times, Butler's approach is a

pointillist semiosis, highly abstracted from its fleshly *materiel*, a meta-reading of the regulation of affect rather than a close reading of experience. (Even so, the chapter entitled 'Survivability, Vulnerability, Affect' delivers a measure of justice by featuring the poetry of Guantanamo Bay inmates and giving it a far wider audience than it would otherwise have.) Overall, this undertaking tends to exert the question without evoking an alternative.

Nonetheless, her paradigm makes explicit that the interconnectedness of a globalised world, whilst accelerating the waging of war, does not necessarily bring with it an increased sense of responsibility for lives destroyed, lost and abandoned. It is an argument that has to be made repeatedly, and Butler has its measure, reviving a politics of recognition that has lain fallow. These lives are neither abstractions nor distant in time - they are dying every day in wars that we in the West continue to fund - and Butler urges us to embrace precarity, that in precarity 'we are bound to one another' (43). This is in stark contrast to state security discourse, which simultaneously disavows and defends against precarity. Butler theorises the interdependence produced by acts of violence, particularly in the centrepiece essay 'Torture and the Ethics of Photography', on the Abu Ghraib photographs, reaffirming that the entry of the Abu Ghraib photos into global culture was a pivotal event, as striking for political thinkers as the televised coverage of September 11, 2001. The two sets of images are indispensable to Butler's critique of representational frames.

Yet, the audience for this work is unclear, as it sits apart from foreign affairs commentary, from cultural anthropology, from literary criticism, from poesis; it comes closest perhaps to aspects of the feminist International Relations written by Christine Sylvester, Vivienne Jabri, and Jenny Edkins. It works into the broader field of feminist security theory, and articulates a claim for non-violence (179-184) in human action. Yet, Butler's convolutions tend to impede perspicacity, especially in the introductory manifesto, where she is at pains to specify her terms and cite her predecessors. In this, Butler's intellectual contribution seems stifled by an institutional labour - grinding the academic publication mill - that distances the reader from her most urgent points. Still, Butler clearly wants the book to be an intervention, to 'reorient politics on the Left toward a consideration of precarity as an existing and promising site for coalitional exchange' (28) - and Cornel West's blurb declares this book an 'intellectual masterpiece'. Exactly *why* the Left needs to be re-engaged to pacifism is a question perhaps best answered by memories of Tony Blair's enthusiasm for the Iraq war. Whether *Frames* is a major Butler text remains to be seen, but her philosophical detailing can be a useful complement to other kinds of work; for years now, transnational feminism has been oriented to emancipating Dalit communities from caste violence in India, raising children in the orphanages of war-torn Africa, and promoting women's health in South American shanty towns. In those places, the consideration of precarity proceeds from visceral encounter, and dialogue is the necessary site of transformational coalitions.

# IN OUR TIME OF DYING

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*David W. Hill*

Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, London, Verso, 2010, 415 pp; £20 cloth.

The publication of Slavoj Žižek's *Living in the End Times* was something of a media event in Britain. An interview with the philosopher and psychoanalyst appeared in the *Observer* whilst (an increasingly frustrated) Gavin Esler made a commendable attempt at a conversation with the motor-brained thinker on the BBC's *Newsnight* program. All of which suggests that the book is one of Žižek's more populist offerings. 'Serious' Žižek produces work of such philosophical insight that they cannot be ignored; 'popular' Žižek offers laughs and film references - but without ever obscuring the vital ideas within. This latest offering is no exception to the latter, a wonderful mix of jokes, provocations, popular culture - and a serious message about a series of impending crises being brought about by global capitalism.

The premise of the book is that the global capitalist system is facing a fatal catastrophe occasioned by the ecological crisis, the biogenetic revolution, the imbalances of the system itself (e.g. struggles over scarce resources), and the rapid growth of social divisions and exclusions (e.g. gated communities, slums). The book is organised into five chapters, each corresponding to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' famous stages of coming to terms with death: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Žižek's hypothesis is that we can see these five stages in the way we (as a society) attempt to deal with the coming apocalypse.

*Denial*: the way ideology works to mask the fundamental disorder. The first chapter begins with an excellent analysis of the burqa/niqab debate in France that briskly introduces the reader to Žižek's account of denial. We are taught, he says, that racism is a product of intolerance; if only we were more tolerant, the world would be a better place. This is to forget the 'background noise' (p6), an ideological move that would have us ignore the violence that sustains the system. Racism is not the product of intolerance, it is the product of injustice and inequality; tolerance is not the cure - emancipation and political struggle is. The same ideological move, tuning-out background noise, can be seen with recycling: 'we are bombarded from all sides with injunctions to recycle personal waste, placing bottles, newspapers, etc., in the appropriate bins. In this way, guilt and responsibility are personalized - it is not the entire organization of the economy which is to blame, but our subjective attitude which needs to change' (p22). This chapter is easily the strongest; it carries a clear message applicable to a range of supposedly ethical actions

that merely allow for the furtherance of wider injustice: charitable donations, bags for life, non-wasteful food consumption, difference politics, and so on. Denial is shown to be the most commonly found stage in our response to the impending death of our way of being, adding urgency to Žižek's argument here but already suggesting that the stages to follow will be less impactful.

*Anger:* protests/violent explosions in response to the injustices of the system. In a pleasant meander, the second chapter begins with a discussion of *What If?* histories (brim-full of ideology, as it happens) and passes through a discussion of Radovan Karadžić and the parallax between his identity as war-criminal and as spiritual leader and poet. The most important message in this chapter regards political mobilisation. Instead of offering sympathy for the plight of the excluded, like the liberals, those who want change, says Žižek, should begin by identifying with them. We should not ask why some are excluded from public space but what we are doing included in it. Here Žižek is identifying spaces of exclusion as sites for resistance: 'The crowds in the slums constitute a huge reservoir for political mobilization: if the Left does not act there, who will?' (p124). This is Žižek's most politically practicable message in the book, a welcome call to return to the grass roots in order that we might throw off the denial so well articulated in the first chapter.

*Bargaining:* changing things here-and-there to preserve the status quo. In the third chapter Žižek calls for a return to critique of political economy: the economy is always political so is the key site of struggle. 'Only in capitalism is exploitation "naturalized", inscribed into the functioning of the economy, and not the result of extra-economic pressure and violence. This is why, with capitalism, we enjoy personal freedom and equality: there is no need for explicit social domination, since domination is already implicit in the structure of the production process' (p207). The expert discussions of Marx and Hegel that follow see a shift in tone. No longer does the book read in the way that Žižek talks whilst presenting an off-the-wall documentary (*The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*) or whilst being Mercurial in interview. Instead, the need to perform seems to drop away as he gets down to some serious work. As for bargaining, Žižek launches a criticism of the idea of minimum wage, a minor tweak that would gloss over the gross flaws in global capitalism.

*Depression:* the zero-point when bargaining fails. The fourth chapter finds Žižek at his most psychoanalytical, examining new subjective pathologies brought about by the collapsing system. He offers the notion of 'abstract violence' (p291), something like market speculation which does not seem to affect human reality in its own sphere and yet has disastrous effects in others (joblessness in other regions of the world, etc.). This is (in psychoanalytic terms) a trauma, an intrusion of the Real that appears meaningless since its cause is not easily perceived. This is why, according to Žižek, we tend to understand such abstract forms of disaster as natural. 'Global capitalism thus generates a new form of illness which is itself global, indifferent to the most elementary distinctions such as that between nature and culture' (p295).

With the discussion of depression, it begins to feel as if the five-stage format is strained. Whilst the account of how we perceive the deleterious effects of global capitalism is merited, lengthy and technical discussion of hard-to-pin-down pathologies is somewhat dazzling - the risk here being that the message is lost in translation (from 'Lacanesé').

*Acceptance*: seeing the situation as a chance for a new beginning rather than as a threat. After going in search of communist culture (in Kafka, Platonov, Sturgeon, Vertov, and Satie) Žižek discusses subversion through sheer brutality, using the German rock band Rammstein as a launch-pad. Observing that Blair could be re-elected despite massive unpopularity, that Berlusconi could hold a majority despite his clownishness, Žižek remarks that 'some form of violence will clearly have to be rehabilitated' if the Left is to 'awaken' the people (p390). However it is vital to note that Žižek is not advocating a program of total violence. Once we accept that the catastrophe we are heading towards is not an 'uncontrollable quasi-natural power' (p387), which is to say, once we confront the abstract violence of the system and give up on bargaining, another way becomes possible. What should we do? Nothing? Some violent revolutionary act? Local pragmatic interventions? Here Žižek advises that there is no need to choose, any one of these strategies being appropriate at different times - even doing nothing can, when appropriate, be a radical act. If these are the routes then what is the destination? For Žižek, it is, of course, the dictatorship of the proletariat. This shift from commentary and diagnosis to political response shows Žižek for what he is: an excellent theorist and psychoanalyst, not a political figure. It is not easy to ascertain what form resistance should really take (how do we choose between violence, pragmatism, nothing?) and the organisation of the dictatorship of the proletariat is opaque. In what way does it differ from that in Marx? If it does not, then how would that work?

Between chapters are diverting interludes, with discussions on such topics as Josef Fritzl, Silvio Berlusconi, and the animated film *Kung Fu Panda*. An interlude on architecture is notable for exemplifying Žižek's scenic routes through topics: 'So, back to postmodern architecture' (p261) he writes, after getting side-tracked by the phenomenological experience of shit in a section that also includes the author's musings on Sarah Palin as a failed feminist icon ('drill, baby, drill!' (p270)).

There are comments on Emmanuel Levinas at several points in the book that echo those made often in Žižek's other work.<sup>1</sup> For example, in his discussion of the burqa he writes:

why does the encounter with a face covered by a burqa trigger such anxiety? Is it that a face so covered is no longer the Levinasian face: that Otherness from which the unconditional ethical call emanates? But what if the opposite is the case? From a Freudian perspective, the face is the ultimate mask that conceals the horror of the Neighbor-Thing: the face is

1. For example, in Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, London, Profile, 2008.

what makes the Neighbor *le semblable*, a fellow-man with whom we identify and empathize (p2).

Žižek notes that if the face is covered then it reveals the abyss of the other, causing anxiety. I do not disagree with this but I find the reading of Levinas uncharitable. The Levinasian other is a source of anxiety. Unknowable - forever 'the stranger in the neighbour'<sup>2</sup> - the other is a source of ontological insecurity: we cannot know what there is with the other. Further, the infinite demands that are placed on the 'I' in encounter with the other are surely a source of further ill-ease, responsibility initiated against the will as the 'I' is 'ordered toward the face of the other'.<sup>3</sup> The Levinasian ethical encounter involves being-towards-the-other despite oneself, adding an element of terror that Žižek does not here acknowledge. Since the face in Levinas is not the flesh-and-bones face, but rather coincides with it, then the coincidence of this face with the veil could equally be said to reveal the horror of the other.

*Living in the End Times* is exhilarating to read. The first chapter is where I feel the lasting impression is derived: an eloquent, bold analysis of the ideas and actions that prop-up an ailing system. To read this is to arm one's self for future debates. Whilst the subsequent chapters do not retain this practical dimension to the same degree, they are nonetheless academically rigid theorisations of what comes next. This is 'popular' Žižek at his finest.

2. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, A. Lingis (trans), Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 2008, p123.

3. *Ibid.*, 11.