

A TOPOLOGY OF THE SENSIBLE

Steven D. Brown

Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, London, Continuum, 2008; 364pp, £19.99 paperback

There is a tendency towards the hagiographic that runs through commentary on Michel Serres. Some of this is undoubtedly well deserved as recompense for the relative neglect of his work in the Anglophone academic world. The translation into English of only limited parts of his now extensive body of publications (running to 50 plus books) has robbed this contemporary of Foucault and Deleuze of the critical attention and acclaim lavished on his peers. Matters may well now be changing with the recent re-publication of the translation of one of his finest works - *The Parasite* - and the very welcome and long overdue translation of *The Five Senses*. Whilst there is much to celebrate here, a few words of caution are also in order. Published originally in 1985, this is a long book that demonstrates that by this mid-point in his career Serres was unconstrained by the demands of prudent editing. The tone of much of the book is poetic, rhapsodic and allusive - readers in search of clear citation or footnotes, which show the 'workings out', will need to brace themselves. Structurally the book is elliptical and rather bloated in places (the third chapter in particular is a long haul). There are wince-inducing moments throughout, notably around the gender and class politics of the text. The sections that reflect Serres' complex relationship to Christianity will also likely leave some readers cold, as will the unpalatable bon vivant theme that dominates one chapter which the publisher has mystifyingly chosen to highlight on the front cover and the back cover text.

ARE YOU STILL HERE?

Good. Now the reasons why you nevertheless need to read this book. Much has rightly been made of the theoretical turn toward affect and sensibility. Yet much of it is mired in somewhat outmoded notions of perception, such as the idea of the senses acting as automatic filters of inputs structured by habit. In such an approach the tendency is to insist on the prioritisation of one 'repressed' sense (e.g. touch) above another 'dominant' sense (e.g. vision). Thus the agenda is set to turn from visual culture to auditory culture, olfactory culture and so on. Serres, by contrast, provides a challenge to the template on which we consider sensation itself and its relationship to philosophies of knowledge. Rather than consider these issues in the abstract or through direct discussion of key philosophical precursors, Serres chooses an empirical path. Every page is alive with rich descriptions of feeling, sensing, apprehending,

engaging, living. This is a vibrant text that is at times overwhelming in its channelling of the noise of the world as it erupts through the body. Serres' writing is well known for its insistence on 'taking the long way home', as Tom Waits has it. The journey here is particularly circuitous, beginning with a tall tale of a fire on a ship and passing by way of the death of Socrates, the drunken Platonic symposium, the Last Supper, Orpheus in the underworld and Ulysses navigating Scylla and Charybdis. In its course look out for tattoos, trampolines, ritual dismemberment, the fairytale 'glass' slipper, Captain Nemo and a bottle of 1947 Yquem. But also prepare for stunning meditations on the nature of empiricism, the resistance of the body to language, and subjectivity as a multiply mediated distribution of sensory engagements.

The division of the body's sensory capacities into a fivefold scheme is deeply embedded in Western Culture. It has its roots in the Aristotelian conception of special senses which would underpin common sense. With the assistance of memory and imagination, these senses form the 'passive' components of consciousness. Being rooted in the world of appearance, they are considered as inferior, yet necessary, capacities in contrast with the power of thought and geometric reason. Thus the sensible and the intelligible are continuously and unfavourably opposed in ancient philosophical dissections of the human soul. The rediscovery of Aristotle in Medieval philosophy further entrenched the idea of a natural organization of the senses into faculties with their own relative autonomy. This scheme then became absorbed into the eventual Cartesian splitting of an immaterial mind overseeing the body as complex mechanical engine of sensation and action.

Western moderns may no longer be Cartesians - at least formally - but commonsense notions of the body still draw upon the idea of five distinct senses. Whilst the title of the book acknowledges this notion, from the very start Serres demonstrates the fallacy of maintaining a clear separation within our understanding of our sensorial capacities and in the opposition between thought and feeling. Starting from the cryptic phrase 'the soul inhabits a quasi-point where the I is determined' (p21), Serres offers a range of examples where whatever it is we name as our 'self', that central point of co-ordination, seems to appear on the surface rather than the deep interior of our being:

I caress your skin, I kiss your mouth. Who, I? Who, you? When I touch my hand with my lips, I feel the soul like a ball passing from one side to the other of the point of contact, the soul quickens when faced with such unpredictability (p26).

Descartes could plausibly claim the mind as distinct from body only by first encouraging us to refrain from any activity. She or he who seeks adequate knowledge is advised to begin their journey by sitting meditatively before the hearth to ponder upon 'my body, this fire..'. Serres insists we start from the opposite direction. Throw yourself into activity. Take a leap from a trampoline,

sink a spade into the earth, lightly touch the skin of another. Where does it feel that your soul lies? It bursts into life at the indeterminate site where the weight, heat and feel of the world blends with our own. We must turn from our efforts to locate the 'global soul,' traditionally seen as that 'small, deep place, not far from the region of the emotions' to recognise the 'local, storm-prone, surface soul: a viscous lake, ready to flare up, on which the multiple rainbow-coloured, slowly-changing light plays' (p24).

At first glance it may appear that Serres is aiming for a superheated version of phenomenology, one which proceeds from Merleau-Ponty's famous investigations of the decentred nature of perception. But Serres strives for a more radical rethinking of subject and object. It is not simply that we experience our selves through sensation, it is that what we call 'self,' the nexus through which knowledge, feeling and memory are intertwined, is literally there in the midst of things - 'the thinking I quivers along the spine, I think everywhere' (p76). As a consequence we have to think of sensation (and cognition) as neither directed outwards from the recesses of our bodies, nor as flowing into us from the outside world, but rather as an ever ramifying and branching network that blooms into life in the middle of worldly engagements:

Knowing things requires one first of all to place oneself between them. Not only in front in order to see them, but in the midst of their mixture, on the paths that unite them ... Touching is situated between, the skin is the place where exchanges are made, the body traces the knotted, bound, folded, complex path, between the things to be known (p80).

The terminology used in this excerpt - folds, knots, paths - displays Serres' long term interest in developments in modern mathematics, and in particular topology. Since his earliest work (see Serres, 1982), Serres routinely opposes the logic of geometry and topology. Whilst the former rests upon clear notions of identity and distinction, topology, and the mathematics which underpins it, is concerned with transformation and connection. Geometric reason seeks the truth of things through specifying their relationship to ideal, abstract propositions which define a space of clear measurement. Serres often associates a will to measurement with violence ('cutting, undoing, subtracting, dividing, differentiating. Destroying. To analyse is to destroy' p167). To delineate and demarcate can set the conditions for domination and exclusion. This leads Serres in an early classic work on Lucretius - *The Birth of Physics* - to value atomism above the mechanics which followed it historically, since it is committed to an account of the physical world which refuses to bifurcate and separate nature from those who seek to measure it. Such an account of science not only inverts the usual notion of progress and incremental understanding, but also, perversely, demonstrates how the purging of religion and spirituality from science blinds it to an awareness of

its deep connection to violence and the sacred. The problem is not inherent to mathematical reason itself, but rather with the metaphysical assumptions of a particular kind of scientific modernity - one which may be drawing to a close. In this sense Serres belongs to a philosophical tradition, including Whitehead, Bergson, Deleuze and, more recently, Isabelle Stengers and Alain Badiou, which insists upon the value of the mathematical as a creative tool for ontological description (although note that Serres tends not to engage explicitly with either Whitehead or Deleuze and tends towards passing critical asides for Bergson):

Clear, distinct knowledge is the result of analyses which divide and separate, systematically distasteful of confusion ... Yet confusion enables fluid multiplication, where the indistinct multiplicities in play are transformed into continuous varieties. The latter flow into one another and vary in concert, subject to multiple variables. Everything leads us to the conclusion that analysis has not yet accepted these varied, complex functions with which it has been dealing for two hundred years (p167).

Topological reason dominates Serres' work from the early 1980s onwards (see in particular *Genesis* and *Rome: The book of foundations*). Crudely put, topology generalizes mathematical reasoning beyond the Euclidean space of purely quantitative relations between sets of points. It sees such metric space as defined by a set of prior qualitative invariants - i.e. properties of objects that are maintained across transformations - which define key mathematic operations. In the classic example, a doughnut and a coffee cup can be treated as equivalent ('homeomorphic') since one can be transformed into the other without destroying its fundamental mathematic properties. Serres' work operationalises such reasoning by showing how two apparently unrelated examples, often separated by seemingly impermeable chronological or cultural boundaries - or indeed between 'history' and 'myth' - demonstrate an exchange of the same invariant properties. This exchange is a process which he names 'translation' in his early work (see Serres, 1982 and Brown, 2002 for commentary), where he also characterises his project as the exploration of uncharted patterns of translation between science and culture, or more pithily as 'true structuralism' (see Serres & Latour, 1995).

To give an example, in the lengthy chapter titled 'Tables', Serres moves back and forth between Plato's *Symposium* and the Last Supper. Both banquets are characterised by the bringing together of a selected group of individuals who, during the course of the meal, are transformed into various social functions - i.e. Peter the founder, Judas the Betrayer, Phaedrus the lover, Alcibiades the loved. In this sense, Serres remarks, the guests at both events are reduced to the level of 'statues', automatons who speak of love or loss in empty allegorical terms without themselves loving or risking anything at all. But this 'first tongue' of speech is replaced with a 'second tongue' of taste when

the wine begins to circulate. During the Last Supper, the wine inaugurates the Eucharist. It makes the Apostles into a group, a collective body defined by their drinking of the wine which 'takes away their individuation which they surrender to it, this crater of blended liquids that charts their relationship and gives them unanimity' (p177). Things go less well at the Symposium where the sampling of the wine is interrupted by multiple speeches and the arrival of new guests. Here the collective body of guests continuously struggles against each speaker in turn, against each pause in the passing of the wine, against the interminable discourse of love that prevents them from actually enjoying one another's company - 'Socrates, Agathon and Alcibiades speak of love without ever making love, or sit down to eat without actually eating or drink without tasting' (p165).

Serres concludes that the events at these banquets exemplify two tendencies of the collective body. One, where individuation is subsumed within the circulation of a common object such that the collective becomes its own subject, the other, where individuation comes from the balance between interruption and exclusion, as the collective turns on one of its members. Readers familiar with *The Parasite* or *Rome* will recognise these tendencies as versions of the 'quasi-object' and the 'parasite' respectively. These are concepts used by Serres to provide a materialist account of collectivity, where the basis of social relations is neither abstract (i.e. a social contract) nor predetermined (i.e. association to maximise self-interest). But in *The Five Senses* what holds together the collective is held to be homeomorphic with the nature of the living body itself. In a crucial section he argues that 'the senses construct our body bit by bit as we use them ... It is constructed from one proximity to the next, from one vicinity to the next around these sensorial roots' (p225). The living body is not a natural object, but rather a 'mixture' or a 'patchwork' of capacities for sensation which are 'clumsily tied together, loosely knotted, tattered if you like: bandaged together. Each time you hear someone talking about a living being as a system you should understand: Harlequin's cape' (p227). What we see at the two banquets are moments of transformation, or thresholds, where this patchwork body tightens up and folds back on itself, as though the taste of the circulating wine were a connective thread being pulled, or else loosens into a hubbub of competing sensations, of noise and confusion.

For Serres everything then turns on how this transformation is understood - 'how can two such complicated labyrinths meet, be superimposed and complement each other?' (p24). Classically this is treated as the subordination of the complexities of sensation to the relative clarity of reason. Reason is the thread which guides us through the labyrinth of perception. In so doing the relative 'hardness' or brute material intransigence of the world is 'softened', a kind of 'ecstatic transfiguration, the loss of the body into the soul' (p25) where sensation becomes information. To think in these terms is ultimately to render the body as merely the housing or vehicle of reason, akin perhaps

to a statue or a 'cybernetic body, a black box' (p25) whose purpose is to capture and prolong the world into sense datum for processing. But such a model implies that the world exists as a discrete set of discernable objects or solids (what Whitehead would call 'simple locations') which can be grasped clearly; hence the traditional association between vision and reason. Serres, by contrast, begins from the notion of mixture:

The theory of knowledge is subordinate to its choices, by which I mean the examples that it uses. It could be said that theory and intuition belong to the order of vision, and that strictly speaking they belong to the solid. I have long been moving towards the fluid and have encountered turbulences in the past and, more recently, mixtures. Thinking about fusion without confusion, I shall soon come to liquidity, difficult to conceptualize but the future resides there, and I shall come to mingled bodies. Meanwhile I am seeking the best model for a theory of knowledge, less solid than a solid, almost as fluid as liquid, hard and soft: fabric (p81).

To found a theory of knowledge on mixture - which might well serve as an epithet for the movement of Serres' thought - is a daunting task. Discrete elements can be compared and evaluated, with sufficient technical and conceptual ability, but properties defined by continuous variety or qualitative invariance resist such treatment. Serres offers a neat illustration. Bergson famously used the time taken for sugar to dissolve in water as a key example to found his own theory of knowledge on the indivisible, qualitative unfolding of duration. But he never asked his readers to wait for the mixture to separate out, a task which would have taken 'until the end of time' (p79). If analysis is understood as division, as the demand to untie the infinite bonds which hold qualitative invariants in myriad arrangements, then ultimately it demands a kind of disengagement from the world, since mixtures are either experienced as they are or decomposed into abstraction:

A mixture is not easily analysed. Work, heat, light, a thousand pieces of information are necessary. If I wish to drink this water, I also have to drink the sugar; if I want the sugar, I must swallow the water; if I want one constituent, I have to pass via the result as well as via the other constituents. The continuous is unanalysable at any given moment, and so are mixtures (p79).

Mixtures may be 'unanalysable' but this does not mean they are unknowable. But 'to know' must be divested of poor examples and choices, such as the notion of cutting apart or separating out. In this respect touch rather than vision serves as a better point of departure since it literally brings the knower into contact with the known, or as Serres would put it, 'starts in the middle'. In the opening chapter titled 'Veils', Serres discusses the medieval art work *The*

Lady and the Unicorn. This series of tapestries depicts each of the five senses through the same basic symbolic grammar. In each there is what appears to be an island, with a noble woman, her attendants, a lion and a unicorn. Serres notes the homeomorphism that runs across the series:

Exact and faithful outlines: each organ is drawn like an island, eye, ear, mouth, nose, and abundant, teeming complex of sensations, the skin stretches out its background canvas and is tattooed by these fiery creatures. The island is woven from canvas of the same texture as its background, the organ is made of puckered skin. One notices in the scene that touch alone had no need of a special tool, its skin becoming at will both subject and object (p53).

The organs of each sense appear to be constituted in the same way, as a special region - the island - woven into the canvas, in the same manner that each physical organ in the body is formed from a folding of skin. This would appear to give touch the 'upper hand' (p54) since through the medium of skin it mingles with every other sense. Indeed we might say that the other four are all special versions of touch - sound striking the outer ear, light falling on the retina, scent chemicals absorbed in the nasal passage, the tongue lighting upon what comes into the mouth. And, unlike the other tapestries which depict some other object (i.e. a mirror for vision, an instrument for sound) touch does not appear to stand in need of further mediation, coming into direct contact with the world (in this case, the unicorn's horn). If this is so then the division of the senses into five clear domains is problematic since touch is integral to them all - 'skin form[s] the continuous backdrop, the base note of the senses, their common denominator. Each sense, originating in the skin, is a strong individual expression of it' (p70). Indeed so problematic is this assumption that Serres, unlike the weavers of *The Lady and the Unicorn*, gives up on the artificial effort of separating the senses in the final two chapters after covering touch, hearing and taste. But what of the sixth tapestry? This alone depicts a small tent on which is emblazoned 'à mon seul désir' ('to my one desire'). Does this represent a kind of summation of all the senses, a passage from the sensory to emotion? Or is it instead meant to reflect a leaving behind of the senses and a retreat into the higher love of God? Perhaps it symbolises a sixth sense, a kind of special sense or attunement which has its roots in desire? It is certainly noteworthy that this is the sole tapestry which depicts words. 'Language arrives' Serres declaims (p.57), and with it a frame which threatens to overwhelm the senses. Throughout the book Serres routinely rounds on the prioritisation of language over the senses. The tongue which speaks renders the tongue which tastes or the ear which hears insensitive, relegates them to the equivalent of wax cylinders whose role is to be the bearer of the word. In some striking passages, Serres roundly condemns 'the wide-spread idea that everything must be said and can be resolved by

language, that every real problem is a topic for debate, that philosophy can be reduced to questions and answers, that one can only cure oneself by talking, that discourse is the only way of teaching anything' (p105). Doubtless the affective turn has blunted the provocative tone of these passages. Yet it is worth recalling that these words were put down some 25 years ago, when semiotic and discursive analyses were considered the hallmarks of critical, perhaps even revolutionary thought. Serres will have none of it: 'I have lived so much in foreign lands, mute, terrified behind the curtain of languages, would I ever have really tasted life if all I had done was listen and speak? The most precious things I know are embedded in silence' (p105). Another interpretation is then offered of the sixth tapestry. The tent is partly open. In fact it is being held open by the Lion and the Unicorn to form a kind of veil around the lady. The senses then form both an opening in which body and world mix, and also an enclosure in which the world is enveloped, implicated. Serres imagines touch, in particular, as a topological operation for veiling and unveiling the world, imposing a structure in the middle of things which provisionally defines connections, continuities, rearranges mixtures. Touch does not analyse or dissect; rather it makes new knots, new ties:

The state of things becomes tangled, mingled like thread, a long cable, a skein. Connections are not always unravelled. Who will unravel this mess? Imagine the thread of a network, the cord of a skein, or a web with more than one dimension, imagine interlacing as a trace on one plane of the state that I am describing. The state of things seems to me to be an intersecting multiplicity of veils, the interlacings of which bodies forth a three dimensional figure. The state of things is creased, crumpled, folded, with flounces and panels, fringes, stitches and lacing (p82).

To know, by this account, is to participate, to intermingle. Serres sees this procedure as a form of empiricism, understood as the forging of links and relations (to be compared, perhaps, with the description of radical empiricism given by William James in *The Meaning of Truth*). The last two chapters of the book are dedicated to a rhapsodic and sweeping hymn to 'fluid empiricism' (p229). Here the senses are the means by which a path is traced between the local and the global. But again the meaning of these terms is vastly revised when what is being described is a topological space of transformation rather than a geometric space governed by relations of magnitude and distance. William James once invoked a distinction between 'saltatory' and 'ambulatory' relations. Very roughly this amounts to the difference between making clear categorical distinctions based on placing two objects in a common frame versus treating relations between the objects as mobile mediating processes. The best way to study these relations would be, of course, to explore them directly oneself. That is precisely what Serres invokes. If the 'state of things' is tangled, and if our bodies are themselves a part of that interlacing, then

we must traverse the possible threads and connections, become further implicated in the mixture - 'experience means that the localities visited are added to the places where one has lived, whereas the universal passes by, retaining from all these places nothing but the universal, such a local global that all other places are forgotten ... The body hybridizes, slowly accumulating the gesture necessary to live on the Huahnghe, the Niger or the Saint Lawrence' (p258).

In doing so we make of our own bodies, our sensibilities, the principle which marks the passage from local to global. It is sensibility which renders our bodies as able to mix, to create knots of relations, and thus to 'multiply between-spaces' (p302) in topological transformations. Because we can taste, we can discern and build a practical body of knowledge, a wisdom or 'sapience' that materially links vines and grapes with the soil and climate of particular regions. The body 'smells a rose and a thousand surrounding odours at the same time as it touches wool, sees a complex landscape and quivers beneath waves of sound' (p306). The senses are then best characterised as 'exchangers'. They agitate mixtures, make new knots and proliferate space through prolonging and extending relations. A taste becomes a spectacle, a touch gives rise to a song. Sensation becomes the very thread that weaves things together:

Between the contingent moment or the chance caress and the hand given according to convention, a day goes by; a multitude of disequilibria mark the waiting with slight deviations. She loses her head, he feels his heart beating; her voice is strained, his trembles; he is beside himself with emotion. Like a river leaving its bed, the story seeks new points of stability, is churned up only to settle into a new stability. A new whole is reorganized as if from vibrations, sounds of words and heart, movements and wind: a storm is brewing, the warm breeze chases the clouds in the sky; the two women, like clouds, go for a walk: a ramble (p298).

As Steven Connor observes in the introduction to this English edition, Serres has spent much of the successive three decades working out what is entailed in this empiricism of the senses. Some of it is undoubtedly an acquired taste. And for those who simply do not have the stomach for yet more 'French Theory' this might well be indigestible. But this translation, like all of Serres' work that we have in English, is a banquet, a feast for thought, even if you have to skip a course (or two)...

CANALYSIS

Laura Mulvey

Bruce Fink, *The Psychoanalytic Adventures of Inspector Canal*, London, Karnac, 2010; 292pp, hardback, £19.99

The protagonist of Bruce Fink's collection of 3 novellas, *The Psychoanalytic Adventures of Inspector Canal* published last year by Karnac Press, is not really a psychoanalyst (in spite of the anagram). At first, his intimate knowledge of psychoanalytic theory seems to be yet another manifestation of his extraordinary erudition that ranges from wines to music. But each story incorporates Canal's awareness of parapraxes, which not only contribute to the solution of the enigma but also bring psychoanalytic depth to the various characters who inhabit the stories, whether members of the investigating team or those investigated. Inspector Canal is a retired inspector of the French Secret Service and thus more, on the face of it, on the side of the detective than the analyst. He lives in New York, resists the murderous speed-up of the modern world, and has the means to indulge his highly sophisticated life-style. Occasionally he is called in by baffled American cops to solve a particularly knotty case, in a relation reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe's Inspector Dupin and the Prefect of Police.

Fink's book is witty and written with great charm and insight and with it the author is clearly also gesturing towards the well-known overlap between certain aspects of psychoanalysis and detective fiction. To begin with, detective fiction as a genre was inaugurated, it seems to be agreed, by Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*, published in 1886, almost simultaneously, that is, with Breuer's analysis of Anna O and his observation of her symptoms as clues to be deciphered and interpreted. Lacan's seminar on Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Purloined Letter' would doubtless be a key point of reference for Fink... But there is also Freud himself. In his reminiscence of his analysis with Freud, the Wolf Man recounts:

Once we happened to speak of Conan Doyle and his creation Sherlock Holmes. I had thought Freud would have had no use for this kind of light reading matter and was surprised to find that he had read this author attentively. The fact that circumstantial evidence is used in psychoanalysis when reconstructing a childhood history may explain Freud's interest in this type of literature.¹

Finally, I would also mention Oedipus himself, in whom the process of detection and analysis were tragically imbricated. Similarly to the detective story, Sophocles' play begins with the crime, the plagues that afflict Thebes,

1. Muriel Gardiner (ed), *The Wolfman and Sigmund Freud*, London, Hogarth Press, 1972, p46

and Oedipus himself takes on the role of detective... only to reveal himself to be the criminal. In this sense the story shifts from that of a man of remarkable intelligence who sets out to interpret clues and evidence, through a crisis of self-knowledge, to the psychoanalytic insistence on the subject's need to transform evidence garnered from the unconscious into the narration of his/her own history.

As one might expect, the stories in *Inspector Canal* dwell considerably on speech. Although the stories themselves are of significance, it's the conversations and the language that they throw up that make up a considerable part of the narrative. These conversations serve several purposes. In the first instance they relate to Fink's argument towards the beginning of his essay 'Knowledge and Jouissance'. Here he reflects on Freud's dissociation of representation and affect, which he suggests, is carried further in Lacan's 'distinction between language and libido, between signifier and jouissance'.² He then draws attention to the way that language functions at the juncture of the two. He says:

for while it is true that psychoanalysis relies only on language to achieve the effects it seeks [...] it nevertheless seeks to have an effect on affect, on the subject as affect, libido or jouissance.³

He goes on to consider the place of enunciation in speech:

It (language) has to be enunciated and there is a bodily component that thus gets introduced: breathing and all of the movements of the jaw, tongue, and so on required for the production of speech.⁴

In *The Psychoanalytic Adventures of Inspector Canal*, characters are characterised very often by accent. The first story 'The Case of the Lost Object' juxtaposes the heavy New York accent, diction and vocabulary of Inspector Olivetti with Canal's own French-inflected and more agile English. However, we learn in the second story that Canal's Chevalier-esque (Maurice, that is) pronunciation of English is a masquerade, one that he uses to disguise his acute observation of the situations he is investigating... But language is also the source of slips of the tongue, of embarrassments, moments of self-revelation that never escape the Inspector's keen notice... although he does, occasionally, slip himself! On the very first page of the book, the Inspector reflects that should de Tocqueville have simply analysed the different uses of French and American idiom, he would have saved himself his journey across the Atlantic.

There is a 'psychoanalytic poetics' in the construction of the stories: the Freudian concept of displacement is literally enacted through journeys, as investigation carries the characters from city to city, or in the second and third stories, from the USA to France. But in the first and second stories, the unravelling of the enigmas at stake involve a certain displacement into the

2. Bruce Fink, 'Knowledge and Jouissance', Suzanne Barnard and Bruce Fink (eds), *Reading Seminar XX: Lacan's Major Work on Love, Knowledge, and Feminine Sexuality*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2002, p22.

3. Ibid., p.23.

4. Ibid., p24.

past, into the plight of a small group of Poles, first under German and then Soviet occupation. This story enables a fascinating and elegant speculation on Mozart, his life and music, which offers an allegory for Canal's co-investigator, also subject of inquiry. The second story, 'The Case of the Missing Formula', takes Canal into an investigation of a supposedly fake Chartreuse, triggering a visit into the frozen time of the Carthusian monks who produce it. This journey also has an allegorical plane: it becomes a journey of self-investigation for the dynamic (and beautiful) American business-woman who is, once again, Canal's co-investigator of the enigma but also the subject of his delicate, probing curiosity.

One of the pleasures of the book is the way that the analytic process is able to produce 'happy ends', not analysis interminable, but the literary or poetic licence acceptable in a novel. There is a kind of irony here, almost as though Fink were acting out a fantasy of 'cure' that cannot be indulged in practice. This is particularly so in the third story 'The Case of the Liquidity Squeeze' by the end of which Canal has managed to deliver all the main characters, police and criminals alike, into the safe hands of eminent analysts. Consistently sex runs through the stories. The secondary protagonists find themselves, willy-nilly, confiding their desires, problems and perversions to Canal, delivering themselves into his hands, first for gentle analytic dissection over a drink and then for professional rehabilitation.

The third story is set in the recent past, near present, and has the financial crisis as its setting, specifically combining the themes of sex and money. Here Fink examines the compulsion to accumulate, as the object of investigation reveals to Canal his insatiable desire to make money, not for personal gain so much as for the sake of it and to achieve the status of 'richer than Bill Gates'. However, Canal discovers that the drive to accumulate also compensates for the successful trader's sexual problems, his displacement of his own sense of phallic inadequacy onto women as substitute phallus. His sexual impotence drives him back to the market where frenetic activity provides a distraction and fetishist 'investment' in the potency of money making. Although Fink links the question of sexual potency and financial speculation as displacement activity, he implicitly also raises the question of what happens to fetishism once it no longer relates to the disavowal of labour as the source of value nor to the satisfaction of commodity acquisition. Perhaps fetishism has been released into activity itself, the restless postponement of gratification offered by the speculative activity of the markets, the potentially vast space of the internet and the (literally) endless sequence of possibility offered by digital culture in general. This might be where the unconscious has moved into a new historicity in which the impossibility of both finality and the recuperation of the lost object are in some ways acknowledged.

LOCK WORK

Ian Parker

Fabio Vighi, *On Žižek's Dialectics: Surplus, Subtraction, Sublimation*, London, Continuum, 2010; 189 pp; £65.00

Every reading of Slavoj Žižek, including those undertaken by the master himself of his own earlier writings, is a re-reading, a reconstruction of lines of argument that have become snagged by the incompatible sharply-honed intricacies of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxism and their resistance to his insistent conceptual reduction of them to German idealism. The worst of that reduction surfaces from time to time in Fabio Vighi's discussion of the way Žižek 'engages with Christianity in order to solicit from its narrative a revolutionary dialectic' (p131), but it functions throughout this otherwise excellent book as a subterranean assumption that it is '*the vertiginous dimension of thought itself*' (p142) that is the stuff of an 'act', an 'event' and of the very 'political parallax' through which we might redeem ourselves as we overthrow capitalism. There is good discussion of the limitations of adjacent political traditions, which include Hardt and Negri, Karatani and Badiou, but the epithet 'idealist' is used as a term of abuse, which is a bit rich coming from a perspective that eschews any actual grounding in the material struggles that threaten to revolutionise the means of production.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the contradictory matrix that Žižek has formed as a reflective apparatus to grasp the nature of a no less contradictory political-economic system, Vighi constructs a faithful reading of the place of dialectics that also inches forward toward a political perspective that, as it were, 'thinks' its way beyond 'the massive task of thinking' (p142) that Žižek is most-times trapped within. This is, as Vighi reminds us, a tricky task because there is no direct link between Lacanian psychoanalysis and democratic politics, or any particular politics as such. Here he pits himself against some of the leftist enthusiasts for psychoanalysis who then attempt to find in the framework an implicit warrant for some form of 'democratic' vision of society. Such an attempt is implausible enough when confined to Freud, but quite impossible when Lacan is brought into the equation. There are acute comments about the importance of 'negativity' which run as a thread through this breathtakingly lucid account of Žižek's work. And, apart from rehearsing the importance of 'dialectics', there are carefully crafted connections between dialectics and the homologous relationship between Marx and Freud.

The mainspring for this endeavour is the connection between Marx's specification of 'surplus value' (extracted by the employer from the surplus labour carried out by the worker) and Lacan's 'surplus jouissance' (excessive enjoyment that is domesticated under capitalism as marketable packets

of pleasure). Marcuse - another very suitable link back to Hegel from psychoanalysis - is evoked at key points in the text to show how the worker has been thoroughly incorporated into the system, and other revolutionary agents are summoned to help us out of this predicament, such as slum-dwellers (p21) or the figure of the child (p46).

The problem with this, and it connects with the problem of 'idealism' (and indeed the claim made in the book that Žižek really provides a 'dialectical materialist' alternative), is that there is a curious reframing of past historical struggles against exploitation as if they were at root expressions of what Marcuse called 'the Great Refusal' (p128), rather than (alongside calls for 'freedom', which is easier to incorporate into an idealist problematic) quite concrete demands for, say, 'bread' and 'peace'. The revolutionary Marxist task of constructing alternative forms of society in opposition to the old forms culminating in 'dual power' (in which the revolutionary forces provide a pole of attraction to break the capitalist state and thus build something better) is completely absent from the circuit of conceptual puzzles this book confines itself to. This might be what Vighi is hinting at though when he calls for 'an audacious creative socio-political project whose consistency is equal to, and materializes, the Real limit of theory itself' (p153).

There are moments, all too few moments, when Vighi is forced to contemplate some possible limitations in Žižek's work; that there is a risk of privileging 'an abstract Real' (p111) and that his injunction to 'do nothing' is actually not very dialectical at all (p138). This rather muted critique, which is effectively also in the frame of the book a self-critique, could be taken further, and it certainly needs to be turned around upon psychoanalysis, which functions here as a code-breaking mechanism that will lay bare the contradictions of capitalism. The whole point of the 'act', Vighi argues, *'is that this gesture should be applied to theory itself'* (p112), so would it also be possible to treat psychoanalysis itself as part of the problem rather than as the solution? Rather than assuming that psychoanalysis provides the master key to unlock the mysteries of 'surplus jouissance' in which 'surplus value' is grounded (which is the way Vighi presents the relationship between the two, in an account that privileges psychoanalysis over Marxism), should we not examine how the 'lock' itself is constructed such that psychoanalysis appears to be the only key that will fit it and so confirm its apparently immutable universal structure?

Many of the contradictions in this sympathetic reconstruction of the role of dialectics in Žižek's work are apparent precisely because Vighi has set the terms of the argument so clearly, and he then makes it possible for the reader to register the importance of fruitful conceptual connections (and one or two worrying elisions) and mark their own critical distance from the text. Such distance may not be an expression of 'absolute spontaneity and pure, unendurable imagination' (p164), and neither will it thereby accord with an Ur-psychoanalytic vision of Hegelian freedom. Instead it is Vighi himself who, in this surprisingly accessible and enjoyable book, sets the conditions for us to work with it dialectically and perhaps come closer to the political project he aims for.

SHADOW MANIFESTO

Benjamin Noys

Alain Badiou, *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Louise Burchill, Cambridge, Polity, 2011; 176pp, Pbk, £9.99

A manifesto is a declaration, a performative and political intervention that makes manifest the inadequacy of the present. The age of the manifesto appears to be definitively past, belonging to the heroic avant-gardes of the twentieth century anatomised by Alain Badiou in *The Century* (2005/2007) as the partisans of the 'passion for the real'. Therefore to write a manifesto today might well be regarded as an affectation or mere parody, let alone to write two, or even three. And yet Badiou has maintained the necessity of this form, returning to it again after previously offering a manifesto for philosophy and a manifesto for art (the 'Manifesto for Affirmationism'). This second manifesto for philosophy suggests the continuing felt need to intervene and re-vindicate philosophy today.

The first *Manifesto for Philosophy* was published in French in 1989, and was the first book by Badiou to be translated into English in 1999. It was a bracing intervention that roundly mocked the proponents of the 'end of metaphysics' thesis and called for a new 'Platonism of the multiple'. In this way it formed a companion to Badiou's magnum opus *Being and Event* (1988), which was only translated into English in 2005. The manifesto's specific targeting of deconstruction, its emphasis on truths (in the plural), its political edge, and its verve had a powerful effect on the scene of Anglo-American Continental Philosophy. It is, unfortunately, unlikely that this second manifesto, which accompanies Badiou's major work *Logics of Worlds* (2006/2009), will have quite the same effect.

One of the problems is indicated by the very vagueness of the 'target' of this second manifesto. If Badiou could specifically identify the figures of deconstruction he was contesting in 1989 (Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy, Lyotard), now his target is the more amorphous combination of cognitive neuroscience and the ideology of democracy - and tellingly no named figures are mentioned. Perhaps we could suggest Daniel Dennett, but then his hardly hegemonic status makes the point. The tension, which Badiou points to, is that the earlier intervention was aimed at re-instating the necessity of a truly modern philosophy against its disappearance, whereas currently philosophy is inflated and dispersed, leaving less traction for Badiou's polemical skills.

Therefore, it is perhaps better not to treat this as a work of polemic, which is actually carried out with more concision in the preface to *Logics of Worlds*, and rather as an introduction or explication of the sprawling and complex architecture of Badiou's third major work of philosophy after *Theory*

of the Subject (1982 / 2009) and *Being and Event*. The first key is that Badiou insists we begin on the same ground as contemporary cognitivist, naturalist, and pragmatic philosophies - a materialism of bodies and languages. What is required is a further materialist turn of the screw: not only bodies and languages, but also truths. It is the explication of this 'materialism of the Idea' to which this work is devoted, and precisely to explaining how the eternity of truth can find itself embodied in a particular world.

This is a dense and difficult work, which draws on the complex mathematical architecture of category theory to articulate an objective phenomenology of appearing. Having read *Logics of Worlds*, it is possible to doubt that such a compressed account will be easily intelligible to a reader unfamiliar with the longer work. That said this shorter analysis does open up new questions and new tensions that bear examination. For Badiou the analysis of appearing requires the development of a logic that can trace and differentiate how truths can appear in a world. Put in the simplest terms the logic of appearing is one of different degrees of intensity, from maximum to minimum, and these degrees are structured within the transcendental of a particular world. If there are multiple possible worlds a truth has to maintain across these worlds, it has to sustain itself as a maximum intensity that is sited in a world, but in excess of it.

Badiou therefore reaffirms his earlier analysis of ontology in *Being and Event* by linking a truth to a contingent event. The event is an exceptional moment that emerges from a void or absence in a particular situation or site. In terms of appearing the 'void' moment is the moment of 'inexistence', an absent element. To use Badiou's political example the proletariat is defined negatively as that which does not appear, or is inexistent, in the usual state of appearing. Instead we have such 'empirical' entities as the 'working class', or the usual tropes of political demonology from the '*canailles*' of pre-revolutionary France to the 'chavs' of contemporary Britain. It is only with the event of revolution that the proletariat emerges into political existence, or, in the terms of *Logics of Worlds* and this work, as a body of truth. In this case what was inexistent changes valence to achieve a maximal intensity and overturn the existing regime of appearance.

The event, however, appears to be a fleeting or vanishing moment, and so doomed to only temporary existence, a criticism which has often been levelled at Badiou. What is actually more crucial for Badiou is not so much the event 'itself', which he defines as always vanishing, but the sustaining of the appearance of the event. An event implies a 'primordial statement' such as, in the event of love, the declaration 'I love you'. To sustain this statement requires the composing of a body through a process of incorporation, in which new bodies (not limited to human bodies) are brought together to form a body of truth. Here we have the emergence of subjects, again not to be confused with empirical individuals, which are the bearers of the event. Complicating his earlier typology, which dealt primarily with subjects faithful

to the event, Badiou identifies three types of subject: first, the faithful subject who incorporates into the event and bears its truth, second the indifferent and reactive subject who tries to preserve things as they are against the innovative force of the event, and finally the hostile obscure subject who violently rejects the possibility of the event by returning to an idealised state of unity. In political terms, these are revolutionary, conservative, and fascist subjects.

Although this opens up a degree of complexity in charting reactions to the event, Badiou's characterisation doesn't appear exhaustive and his lines of division rather clearer than the actual patterns of political engagement. What is perhaps more interesting is his consideration of what he calls 'ideation', in which the 'Idea' is what mediates between the individual and the 'body' of the subject of a truth. If the event is a violent intrusion into the world then the 'Idea' is a point of orientation, and what binds together the elements on the difficult and erratic path of universalising a truth. What is interesting here is the affective dimension posed in the 'Idea' concerning the ability of an individual to sustain a truth that is guaranteed by nothing. To borrow Philip Larkin's reflection we could say that in the experience of the event 'Here no elsewhere underwrites my existence'.

There is no doubt that against the classical simplicity of Badiou's ontological schema his work on appearance generates a more complex, if not to say unwieldy conceptuality. The language of bodies, differentiation, incorporation, mutation, and even anguish has a more baroque and even Deleuzian edge that comes as something of a surprise considering Badiou's own commitments. Of course this is in part an effect of the difficulty in the underlying logical formulations, but it does also speak to the moment in which Badiou is elaborating his work and the problems he is responding to. Despite the occasional stridency of expression, we could say that the more uncertain and even tentative tone of this work is the result of Badiou facing more squarely the difficulties of sustaining the appearance of truths when they do not coincide with the historical present. In terms of the usual form of the manifesto, which makes a demand on its times, even if to radically reject them, the result is disappointing. Repetition, in this case, does not succeed in altering, but it may suggest the need to begin again and re-pose the conditions for philosophy today.