

# THAT STYLE

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*Adam Roberts*

Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, London, Verso, 2009, 625pp; £29.95 hardback, £16.99 paperback

*Valences of the Dialectic* is a great wedge of book, two thirds of a thousand pages long, made up of many previously published essays, reviews and introductions to other philosophers. Written especially for this collection are the first section 'The Three Names of the Dialectic' and the last 'The Valences of History' - one of the best things here, actually. In between we have various things: a long, dense two-part section on Hegel ('II. Hegel Without *Aufhebung*'), a rag-bag of essays ('III. Commentaries') on Derrida, Deleuze, Lukács and Sartre, a selection of shorter and sometimes introductory-level essays ('IV. Entries') on things like Commodification, Ideology, Lenin and the like, and four essays and a hundred pages on politics, globalisation and Utopia ('V. Politics').

There's a lot here, and much of it is stimulating and rewarding. 'Our only rule', we're told at the beginning, 'will be a strict avoidance of the old pseudo-Hegelian caricature of the thesis/antithesis/synthesis; while our only presupposition will be the assumption that any opposition can be the starting point for a dialectic in its own right' (p19). And indeed Jameson's various dialectics are supple and dextrous enough to generate a great many new perspectives. I liked his attempt to de-transcendentalize (as it were) Hegel in a way that isn't just materializing Hegel: 'Absolute Spirit is not a concept of a phenomenon one can analyze, let alone understand; but it is [rather] a formal moment that can be grasped only as ideology or method' (p106). And I liked the deliberate 'immobilization' of dialectical process that Jameson undertakes; a denial (in part) that dialectical motion is in any sense 'a progress' or a passage from a to b to c - his way of freeing Hegel's dialectic from vulgarisation as a particular sort of linear narrative. (On the other hand, later in the book, coming at the same matter via Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative*, FJ declares himself 'at least postmodern enough to be willing to defend the proposition that everything is narrative' (p484); but he means something particular by 'narrative' here - and anyway, one of the joys of immersing oneself in dialectical philosophy is that contradiction is always a symptom of productive negation, not conceptual muddle). The engagement with 'materialism' is also very promising, refusing to take this Marxist bedrock for granted to the point of asserting 'the concept of matter as such is an incoherent one' (p7). And from time to time the writing rises to a kind of pomo-poetry, a hectic elevation - like this passage from near the end:

We have indeed secreted a human age out of ourselves as spiders secrete their webs: an immense, all-encompassing ceiling ... which shuts down visibility on all sides even as it absorbs all the formerly natural elements in its habitat, transmuting them into its own man-made substance. Yet within this horizon of immanence we wander as alien as tribal people, or as visitors from outer space, admiring its unimaginably complex and fragile filigree and recoiling from its bottomless potholes, lounging against a rainwall of exotic and artificial plants or else agonising among poisonous colours and lethal stems we were not taught to

avoid. The world of the human age is an aesthetic pretext for grinding terror or pathological ecstasy, and in its cosmos, all of it drawn from the very fibres of our own being and at one with every post-natural cell more alien to us than nature itself, we continue murmuring Kant's old questions - What can I know? What should I do? What may I hope? - under a starry heaven no more responsive than a mirror or a spaceship, not understanding that they require the adjunct of an ugly and bureaucratic representational qualification: what can I know *in this system*? What should I do in this world *completely invented by me*? What can I hope for alone in an *altogether human age*? (p608)

But this sort of thing, I have to say, is the exception rather than the rule.

So, yes, the style. The book is made out of strings of chuntering Jamesonian sentences, in which conditional 'mights', 'may be saids' and 'could be thoughts' frame a series of ringing assertions about what is always the case, what we must do and what the absolute horizons of thought and action are. Some reviewers have made the Henry James connection, and there is a beguiling fils/père pseudo-family resemblance about this son-of-James. Though the prose of *Valences* reads like late James, not least in the way it calls to mind H.G. Wells's famous characterisation of that style as a hippopotamus making a laborious effort, whatever the cost to its dignity, to pick up a pea.

Indeed, despite many moments of piercing analysis, much of this volume makes for wearying reading. Two thirds of a thousand pages is, frankly, too many for the arguments Jameson wants to make here - involved and complex though they often are. At one point he asserts that 'if we could summarise the content of philosophizing in a page or two, we would not have to do it in the first place' (p86) - which seems to me wrong on its own terms (as if Nietzsche's apothegms don't trump the collected works of Husserl, or the brevity of *Civilisation and its Discontents* isn't better in every way to the coiling bulk of the *Écrits*) but also, worse, smacks of an already long-winded writer giving himself permission to extend his wind further. Žižek, with whom Jameson engages at some length in *Valences*, is often bonkers; but he is very rarely dull. The same cannot be said of Jameson's new book.

A degree of repetition is inevitable, I suppose, in a book made up of previously published essays and reviews all of which treat the same broad topic. But *Valences* goes beyond inadvertency in this regard. In his reading of Hegel's *Logics* FJ lays before us the heart-sinking notion that a philosophical work, though it appears at first glance 'turgid and laborious', may actually best be read not 'as an attempt to expound some idea which the reader then attempts ... to grasp' but rather 'like a piece of music, and its text a score, which we must ourselves mentally perform and even orchestrate' (p80). *Valences*, in other words, is a book in which FJ has not only *not* attempted to smooth out the repetitions and superfluities, but in which he has actively pursued them, as quasi-Wagnerian motifs and themes. I daresay I'm not the only reader who finds this strategy tiresome, and worse - self-indulgent, even self-deluding.

Anyway, I've no desire to tilt at the creaking windmill of The Jamesonian Style. It is what it is, and I've been reading FJ long enough to have grown rather fond of his succession of huge spooling sentences, interpenetrated by numerous holey-space-style parentheses and subordinate clauses. And nobody could deny that FJ embraces the dialectical mode in this book wholeheartedly. No matter how commonsensical a notion might appear to be, he is prepared to assert its antithesis. Sometimes this works brilliantly: a chapter on 'Utopia as Replication'

addresses the phenomenon of Wal-Mart from the standard left-wing point of view ('a new Wal-Mart drives local businesses under and reduces available jobs; Wal-Mart's own jobs scarcely pay a living wage, offer no benefits or health insurance, the company is anti-Union, hires illegal immigrants ... promotes sweat-shops and child labor outside the country ... exercises a reign of terror over its own suppliers, destroys whole ecologies abroad and whole communities here in the US, it locks its own employees in at night etc etc' (p420)). As Jameson drily notes, this is 'unappetizing'; but he immediately undertakes a dialectical reading - 'this business operation, whose capacity to reduce inflation and to hold down or even lower prices and to make life affordable for the poorest Americans is also the very source of their poverty and the prime mover in the dissolution of the American small town' - as a way of thinking through the antithetical revolutionary potential of this phenomenon: 'the ultimate in democracy as well as in efficiency ... as admirable as the Prussian state or the great movement of *instituteurs* in the late nineteenth-century French lay education, or even the dreams of a streamlined Soviet system. New desires are encouraged and satisfied as richly as the theoreticians of the 1960s (and also Marx himself) predicted'. In sum, it is the very success of Wal-Mart as a Capitalist entity that dissolves Capitalism:

Wal-Mart is then not an aberration or an exception, but rather the purest expression of that dynamic of capitalism which devours itself, which abolishes the market by means of the market itself (p421).

This is very neat indeed, although Jameson slightly undermines the rhetorical impact with a whiff of smugness at his own cleverness ('I trust that this proposal will be even more scandalous than Lenin's celebration of monopoly ...'); and the dialectical antithesis smacks rather more of wishful thinking than the hard-to-deny commercial reality of the thesis.

More, once committed to this strategy, FJ finds himself endorsing some odd and even offensive positions. "'Big Government" should be a positive slogan', he tells us; "'bureaucracy" itself needs to be rescued from its stereotypes and reinvoked' (p382), which seems to me questionable. Less forgivably he tells his readers that 'Stalinism was a success and fulfilled its historic mission, socially as well as economically' (p397) (really? Mightn't we say the same thing about Hitlerism, *on its own terms*?). Or, again, quoting (oddly) 'editors of the *Economist*' as corroborating authorities, he praises one-party States in Africa as constituting 'a useful path towards rapid industrialisation'. Events in early 2011 make this indulgence of African dictatorships look particularly wrongheaded, I'd say.

Of course, Jameson can hardly be blamed, in a book published in 2009, for not knowing about the radical changes currently sweeping across North Africa; except that much of *Valences* is given over to deeper analyses of the contemporary state of the world (the project is nothing less than a reading of 'late capitalism of the world system today and the place of Marxism within it' (p404); and we might be forgiven for thinking that, if these analyses had any explanatory power then things like the current upheavals would be at least foreshadowed.

But *Valences* is a work of political and cultural analysis that is very much bang *not* up to date. Partly this is because some of the pieces reprinted here date from the early 1990s; but then again, many were written in the noughties, and the book itself was published (after all) at the end of 2009; so it's not as if Jameson lacked the chance to revise in the face of more recent events. Yet Jameson's political frames of reference are, broadly, twofold: 1968, and the surrounding

political and cultural climate of late 1960s quasi-Utopian engagement on the one hand; and the bugbears of 'Reagan and Thatcher' on the other ('what began to be visible with Reagan and Thatcher...' (p357); 'the crudest forms of ideology seem to have returned in Reaganism and Thatcherism' (p285); injustice reached a 'paroxysm in the Reagan years...' (p391)). The reader looks in vain for any reference to Blair, Sarkozy, Merkel, or even to George W. Bush. There is a difference between living with an awareness of history and living in the past, after all.

It's at this level - a core one - of engagement with contemporary politics, history and ideology that *Valences* is most disappointing, I think. There's a veritable angelic disco happening on the heads of some of the book's pins - the consonance between Aristotle's 'kata' and Mallarmé's '*selon*', for instance (p477f.); or the fundamentally anti-dialectical nature of Hegel's *Verstand* (pp75-101). But there's very little, or nothing at all, on Counter-terrorism, Climate Change, or the Credit Crunch. There is, to be fair, a lengthy (but not especially productive) engagement with 'globalisation' (pp435-72), and from time to time FJ will step away from teasing out 'the conceptual stalemates of the aporetic' (p530) to pronounce on more practical matters. For example he considers it 'scandalous' that right-wing governments 'lower taxes so rich people can keep more of their money' (p285). So do I, as it happens. But I'm not sure this level of analysis is really dialectical enough to merit inclusion here.

Another way of saying this is to mention one of the (Republican) elephants in Jameson's 'Dialectics' room. Francis Fukuyama's *End of History* is also, of course, an interrogation of Hegel; the German is praised in that book as 'the first *historicist* philosopher - that is, a philosopher who believed in the essential historical relativity of truth. Hegel maintained that all human consciousness was limited by the particular social and cultural conditions of man's surrounding environment - or as we say by 'the times'. Past thought, whether of ordinary people or great philosophers and scientists, was not true absolutely or 'objectively' but only relative to the historical or cultural horizon in which that person lived'.<sup>1</sup> Of course, Fukuyama has a much narrower understanding of 'the dialectic' as a historical process (basically: Hegel's master-slave dialectic projected onto the big screen of the C20th Cold War), and of course FJ is orthogonal to Francis Fukuyama in terms of political allegiance; but that doesn't mean that his argument can be simply ignored, or treated as merely beneath contempt.

Fukuyama steps into Jameson's argument hardly at all, and when he does it is only to be sent away with a wave of the hand. 'But is it certain', FJ asks, rhetorically questioning in a rather clumsy way, 'that all of human history has been, as Fukuyama and others believe, a tortuous progression towards the American consumer as a climax?' (p444) This isn't as witheringly dismissive as it needs to be, not because FJ's reservoirs of scorn are dry as far as the neo-con ideology is concerned, but because the terms of abuse are weirdly complicit with FJ's own project - after all, what is Jameson's multivalent dialectic if not 'tortuous'? Or more specifically: the main argumentative burden of FJ's long, mazy, complex first three chapters is precisely that the 'progression' so blithely imputed by many to Hegel's version of the dialectic is much more 'tortuous' than has previously been thought, to the point indeed of racking the notion of narrative progress entirely to a standstill.

I was disappointed, too, that there's so little actual analysis of Marx here. The one chapter that looks like it might address Marxian dialectics directly ('Marx's Purloined Letter') is in fact a reprinted review of Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, and is much more to do with deconstruction than with Karl (in another sense, of course, Marx is immanent in the whole project; but I'd have liked some specific engagement with Marx himself nonetheless). I'm not sure I agree with

FJ that 'globalisation' carries at its heart a dystopian 'fear of multiplicity and overpopulation' (p427): I'd say the motor is not the fear of sheer populousness, but the older demons of fear of the Other, largely still racially (or 'culturally') conceived. And I wondered at the blithe I-know-what-the-future-holds confidence with which he claims that 'other languages will never come to equal English in its global function, even if they were systematically tried out' (p443). But, taken as a whole, this is a more rewarding read than the last FJ microwave-oven-sized collection of previously published essays, articles and reviews, *Archaeologies of the Future*. That book had an interesting thesis about 'utopia' (rehearsed again here in *Valences*), but packed it about with a great deal of expanded polystyrene. The texture of *Valences* is denser throughout: and some of it - the two Sartre chapters, for instance, or the first Hegel one - left me feeling like I'd just had an Indian Head Massage from Edward Scissorhands. Not that that's necessarily a bad thing.

## NOTES

1. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, London, Penguin, 1993, p62.

# FUTURE WILLIAMS

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*Ben Harker*

Andrew Milner (ed), *Tenses of Imagination: Raymond Williams on Science Fiction, Utopia and Dystopia*, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2010, 243pp; £30.00

As North Sea oil revenues and the military assertion of British imperialism in the Falklands shored up the first Thatcher administration, Raymond Williams turned to the future, writing *Towards 2000* (1983), his final major work. He described what he called 'plan X', a 'new politics of strategic advantage' which sought to secure for itself 'an effective even if temporary edge' in a context of rolling, late capitalist crisis (p150). As Andrew Milner notes in this welcome new anthology, Williams' late 'exercise in radical futurology ... remains startlingly prescient' (p148). The future Williams saw surrounds us: the disintegration of the post-war consensus; deregulated finance; decimated industry; a commodified public sector; fundamentally restructured relations between capital, labour and the state; a hegemonic 'assent to capitalism even in a period of its most evident economic failures' (p161). As Milner notes, Williams' main mistake, if we can call it that, was in underestimating the resolve of the X planners and in overestimating the resources of hope embodied by those with alternative visions. Williams here singled out feminist movements, peace and environmental movements and genuine labour movements; he excluded the labour parties, which he by now regarded as thoroughly incorporated into dominant structures.

Such a list is perhaps surprising from a figure not known for his breadth as a theorist of social movements and identities; Milner quotes Williams' former doctoral student Morag Shiach observing that though feminists can find much of value in Williams' work, they won't find many women (p114). But the great value of Milner's collection is precisely that it defamiliarises Williams, showcasing the breadth of his concerns. Milner does this by tracking and restoring to view Williams as a thinker whose interest in science fiction, utopian and dystopian writing was abiding and wide-reaching. The sixteen extracts here, chronologically sequenced and framed with judicious editorial introductions, sample the full spectrum of Williams' work in futuristic projection, covering his fiction, book reviews, and writing on literature, politics and television. Some of the material is very familiar, notably those extracts from Williams' major works, *Culture and Society* (1958), *The Long Revolution* (1961) and *The Country and the City* (1973). But even these selections take on new resonances when placed in the broader context of Williams' restless engagement with cultural works that imagine alternative futures, and with the complex connections between such projections and their moments.

So in Milner's book we see *Culture and Society's* notoriously brusque dismissal of William Morris' *News from Nowhere* - brushed aside as a repository of Morris' regressive whimsy - situated in the context of an earlier essay, 'Science Fiction' (1956), in which Williams reads Morris' text more positively, finding there the culmination of earlier utopian formations. We then see Williams returning to Morris twenty years later in 'Utopia and Science Fiction' (1978) when, as a critic with a more developed sense of the mechanisms and textual effects of futuristic fiction, he produces a more nuanced reading. Here he identifies that *News from Nowhere* is path-breaking in having incorporated into the narrative the process through which the utopia is reached. Williams now

makes the link between Morris' revolutionary belief in the working class as agent of historical change - applauded in *Culture and Society* but considered lacking from *News from Nowhere* - and the text, detecting a complex, compensatory relationship between the text's unsatisfactorily cosy utopianism and its frank recognition that revolution is a process of 'chaos, civil war, painful and slow reconstruction' (p104). So Williams comes to see the text's greatest strength - its imagination of the *route* to utopia through a dark but necessary history - as dialectically related to its weakness, 'the days of peace and rest', now reconceived by Williams as 'the fused and confused moment of different desires and impulses: the longing for communism, the longing for rest and the commitment to urgent, complex, vigorous activity' (p105).

The scope and structure of Milner's anthology, through which we can see such returns, revisions and refinements as part of a larger project, is also valuable in constructing an intellectual biography of Williams whose plot - as others have observed - reverses the predictable pattern of youthful radicalism yielding to creeping conservatism. With Williams, the trajectory moved the other way. Milner's general editorial introduction registers this, although the framework he provides - with the three phases of Williams' thought ('left culturalism', 'cultural materialism', '(anti-) postmodernism' corresponding to three moments ('Old New Left', 'New New Left' and 1980s engagement with 'globalization of corporate capitalism'), each 'giving rise' to different readings of science fiction, utopia and dystopia - runs the risk of over-schematisation. Within this diagrammatic structure, the work is potentially presented as series of reflexes of broader political and social shifts in ways that play down the complex dynamics of re-reading and critical re-assessment that the anthology so richly demonstrates.

What does emerge, however, is that across these periods Williams was sharply attuned not only to futuristic projections but also to the transmission, reproduction and renewal of collective ways of seeing and structures of feelings across generations and through often hostile history. The future, as Francis Mulhern notes in his endorsement of this book, 'was the ultimate stake' in all Williams' work. Milner's timely collection demonstrates the relevance of Williams' work as a theorist of the subjunctive at a moment when, as Slavoj Žižek claimed recently, the 'only true question' is whether global capitalism contains 'antagonisms strong enough to prevent its indefinite reproduction'.<sup>1</sup>

## NOTES

1. Slavoj Žižek, 'How to Begin from the Beginning', *New Left Review* 57 (May-June 2009): 4.

# CULTURAL SHIMMER

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*Michael Goddard*

Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (eds), 2010, *The Affect Theory Reader*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 416pp, paperback; \$23.83 US, £16.99 UK

After the late twentieth-century linguistic and cultural turns, the twenty-first-Century (re)discovery of affect. Such at any rate is the sequence presented by the editors of *The Affect Theory Reader*, following in the footsteps of such recent volumes as Patricia Ticineto Clough's *The Affective Turn* (2007). However, whereas that volume stressed affect as a novel rupture within theories of the social, in *The Affect Theory Reader*, we are presented less with a break than the tracking of a slow mutation towards affect that while proliferating in the present has its roots in the past and specifically within the trajectories of cultural studies, as attested to by the interview near the end of the book with Lawrence Grossberg. As the editors Melissa Gregg and Greg Seigworth point out, this is not a reader that collects the classic texts in a given field, nor a text book, nor an account of the latest trends in research, but like affect itself it is somewhere in between. As they state in the introduction, rather than a theoretical overview of 'this somewhat ephemeral and ubiquitous thing called affect theory' (p18), they hope that the collection instead 'took on a life that might be more untimely ... to convey - more than once - the contagiousness of ... positive affects' (p18). What is interesting here is that writing about the slippery topic of affect typically becomes a question of writing *with or through* affects, a point confirmed in the personal affective notes both editors add situating affect in relation to both their own lives and everyday encounters with punk rock, trains and reading cultural theory, as well as in the various styles employed by the authors of the subsequent chapters in the volume.

However, for all the ephemerality of affect theory, the editors certainly endeavour to situate it in relation to a range of intellectual approaches and trajectories. This includes a sophisticated treatment of affect in Spinoza, and the way this has come, via Gilles Deleuze's reading of Spinozian affect, to inform a significant strand of thinking about affect in cultural studies as the always unknown capacity of 'what a body can do', its capacities to affect and be affected. This is contrasted with another trajectory emerging out of Sylvan Tomkins' psychobiology of differential affects, especially via the work of Eve Sedgwick, that draws on an articulation of Darwinian evolutionary hardwiring with aspects of Freudian psychoanalytic theory. As incompatible as these approaches might seem, this has not prevented their fertile cross pollination, as can be seen in several chapters of the reader. However, affect theory is more complex than the merging of these two streams. In fact they identify no less than eight possible orientations in the field of affect studies, crossing such domains as (post) phenomenologies, science studies, cybernetics, non-Cartesian philosophies, activism, non-linguistic psychologies and ethnologies, and emotion and embodiment studies, and state that these orientations are only partial and by no means exhaust the current or potential field of affect theory. Another dimension, not emphasised by the editors is a geographical one; many of these contrasting trajectories and approaches to affect having especially taken root in Australian cultural studies and it would be fair to characterise the collection as an Australo-American one, that is based on both an explicit displacement of the



dominant, semiotic-political tendencies of British cultural studies and its affective reinvention in the contexts of US/Canadian (Grossberg, Clough, Massumi) and Australian (Morris, Probyn, Gibbs) cultural studies.

The chapters of the volume are less a collection of the seminal works in the field than a cross-section of contemporary expressions of affect theory; while some of the chapters by the more well known contributors have appeared elsewhere, they were all published within the last five years and have mostly been updated for this volume. The reader starts with some of these contributions, namely Sara Ahmed's account of the 'hap' in happiness, Massumi's delineation of the 'political ontology of threat', and Elsbeth Probyn's engagement with the affect of shame across a heterogeneous range of writers.

Ahmed insists on the complexity of happiness, seeing in it a combination of affect, intentionality and evaluation (p29). She is particularly interested in what she calls the 'hap' of happiness, its nature as a contingent happening, even while it is often considered as a state to be cultivated. More importantly Ahmed complicates this account, suggesting that happiness can have unjust and unhappy effects that a 'feminist, anti-racist and queer politics' can expose (p50) and that this political alienation from happy objects might be a more socially productive orientation. Despite the avowed aim to focus on 'happy objects', Ahmed leaves us with an affirmation of 'melancholic subjects ... who are even prepared to kill some forms of joy' (p50). This in a sense undermines her argument, since the chapter turns out to be about bad feelings after all, nevertheless it serves to underline the complexity of affect and its evaluation, its tendency to never be quite what it seems.

Massumi's chapter argues polemically yet philosophically that threat operates with a particular temporality, the future perfect of the will have been; the US invasion of Iraq, for example, was retrospectively justified not according to any real threat such as actually discovered WMDs but a future threat that 'will *have been* real for all eternity' (p53). For Massumi, threat, while inhabiting linear time, is not of this time but rather a recursive future past of pre-emption, in which the affect of threat is always able to produce its own object. Massumi's chapter develops at both an abstract level of the ontology of threat and its actual instantiation in a series of events, especially in a reading of 9/11 less as the beginning of a new era than as the crossing of a threshold of threat, giving a kind of 'thickness' (p62) to pre-emptive modes of power. This approach is ultimately aligned with the Whiteheadian non-phenomenological concept of the event as an occasion of experience, able to encompass the immanence of the future in the present.

Probyn's chapter does something else again in her engagement with 'writing shame'. Here it is less the case of delineating the political or philosophical nature of a specific affect than exploring what can be done with it and what it can do via the interconnections between writing and shame. While two of the examples Probyn refers to, namely T.E. Lawrence and Primo Levi, were already key examples of the intersections between writing and shame identified by Deleuze, Stephen King, as an immensely popular fictional author, would seem to be an entirely different category of writer. Nevertheless, she detects in King's work a comparable shame-induced ethics of writing (p75), as well as detailing her own feelings of shame and disgust in relation to writing on shame, emphasising that 'shame is a painful thing to write about' (p72). While Probyn is wary of the heroics Deleuze ascribes to the writer provoked by shame, she embraces the idea that writing shame turns the writer's body into a battleground of conflicting forces, 'sometimes to produce new visions of life' (p89).

These initial orientations towards affect sketch out different potentials and tendencies of affect theory that the following chapters pursue in a variety of ways. Some focus more on the politics of affect, whether in the potentials for ethico-aesthetic responses to emergent political events as in the Tampa sinking, explored by Andrew Murphie and Lone Bertelsen, or the emergence of the post-biological, bio-political manipulation of life itself critically engaged with by Clough. Other chapters focus on affect in more everyday settings such as the affective dynamics surrounding food and taste (Ben Highmore), the affective politics surrounding Friday night drinks (Gregg), or the quotidian modulation of psycho-active medication by mental health service users explored by Stephen Brown and Ian Tucker. Inherent in many of the chapters is an engagement with the affective potentials and limitations of life in the context of contemporary consumer capitalism, whether formulated critically as in Lauren Berlant's 'Cruel Optimism' (pp93-117), or more affirmatively, as in Nigel Thrift's account of the 'Material Practices of Glamour' (pp289-308). While there is a strong combination of everyday practices, ethico-political encounters and metaphysical speculation as provokers of both affect and affective theory in the volume, one dimension that is relatively lacking is that of aesthetics. While many of the chapters touch on affective encounters with various forms of media, the only chapter to really put aesthetics at the centre of thinking affect is probably Anna Gibbs' chapter which relates affect to mimesis and gesture, drawing at once on Tomkins and Deleuze, Michael Taussig and Walter Benjamin in order to discern different levels of mimetic communication. Nevertheless, the collection ends in a fashion that is at once affective and aesthetic, in a type of fictional afterword by Kathleen Stewart that is both about affective refrains and actually weaves some of the contents of the book into series of affective refrains in the construction of a theory-fiction.

While a reader of the book might be left less rather than more sure of what precisely constitutes 'affect theory', or even affect itself, s/he is nevertheless very likely to be moved by the range of both thought and affective styles that make up the volume and constitute what the editors call in the introduction, an 'inventory of shimmers' (p11). This incitement to '*more than* discourse', the capacity 'to touch, to move, to mobilise readers' (p24) is exactly what one would hope for from a reader of affect theory, and is what the contributions that make up this collection indeed achieve.

# FOR ONE HAND

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*George McKay*

Alex Lubet, *Music, Disability, and Society*, 2011, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 208pp, paperback £17.99

If it is the case that music has come late to the table of what is being called cultural disability studies - behind studies of performance, literature, or media, for instance- it is also arguable that the wait has been worth it. Once one gets past his introduction's tiresome pops at jargon-laden cultural studies and at the poverty of 'scholarly writing about music by nonmusicians' (p6) (I wonder if often enough such academics are actually musicians who just don't work in music departments - why not, is a good question for another day), Alex Lubet's new book offers a provocative and wide-ranging set of readings which undoubtedly progress - or usefully and creatively muddle - thinking in the field. Lubet's musical examples are sweepingly and impressively international: from African-American jazzers to western and Egyptian orchestras, Ukrainian minstrels to Taliban music-haters. The book will I think fascinate readers in music and disability studies alike.

It does though display a largely American focus in its theorising and its legal frame of reference. The latter is important for Lubet. He makes a valid point about the ways in which disability is defined; what for a musician may be a career-halting impairment may for someone else not even be evaluated as a disability. Finely controlled dexterity across eight fingers and two thumbs is pretty handy for a pianist, say, but not quite so essential for a speech therapist or park warden. (This works in reverse, too: 'within numerous worlds of music, blindness - so often the stuff of much grim metaphor - is little or no impairment' (p72)). But it is curious here to read how he illustrates his argument with ahistorical conjecture about whether or not the nineteenth century German composer Robert Schumann would have qualified as disabled in the terms of the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act, for example.

Initially music is presented as an ability or a special talent, and then considered for its enabling or limiting capacities. From the music chosen (the heavily body-centred form of popular music is largely absent) jazz is understood as enabling, its 'essence is the embrace of difference' (p65). Lubet tentatively suggests that, as a music of black origin rooted in transatlantic slavery, jazz and disability function as a kind of socio-cultural 'coalition of the oppressed' (p67). The western classical tradition, on the other hand, which, as Lubet notes, includes the very kinds of music departments he has spent his career working in (one answer then to my question above?), is largely a 'crip-free' zone, its orchestras 'sonic Spartas that eliminate' those unable (for whatever reason) to be good enough (p77). This is a damning view of classical music's institutions, lightened by discussion of the repertoire composers have produced over the years for one-handed pianists.

The book's most ambitious chapter (Lubet effectively tells us this is so) aims late on to offer a counter-intuitive reading of music which undercuts many of our and his preceding assumptions. Now music is not simply culturally open or closed to the disabled, but, in certain social circumstances, *music is itself a disability*. Lubet argues that what we assumed was an ability

is, for societies like the Taliban or some ultra-orthodox Jews, a source of disability. In such societies 'musicality has become a disability' - and practising or listening to it is the very source of one's exclusion and punishment, even death (p109). Although I may not be entirely convinced - disability here becomes a metaphor of cultural oppression, removed from the specificity of corporeal experience into a new form of social model - I am provoked and made to rethink my view about the relationship between music and disability.

# PLATONIC SEX?

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*Chloë Taylor*

Stella Sandford, *Plato and Sex*, Cambridge, UK, Polity, 2010, 209pp; £16.99 paperback, £55 hardback

'Platonic Sex' rings oxymoronic since the more common expression which it brings to mind, 'Platonic Love', is popularly defined by the absence of sexual relations. Stella Sandford's brilliant new book, *Plato and Sex*, focuses on sex not in the sense of sexual relations but sex difference, and suggests that 'Platonic Sex' is oxymoronic in another sense, however, which is that sex 'is our illusion; it was not Plato's' (p164). The 'and' in her title is thus 'as much disjunctive as conjunctive' (p1). The modern idea of sex is of a natural-biological binary which plays a foundational role with respect to gender and sexuality. The feminist separation of gender from sex, intended to distinguish social categories from a biological one in order to problematize the former, naturalizes sex and leaves it untheorized. Through a series of close readings of Plato's dialogues and recent feminist and psychoanalytic interpretations of these texts, Sandford compellingly demonstrates that the modern conception of sex is in fact absent in Plato's work, but that twentieth-century scholarship projects it onto Plato's writings in anachronistic ways. Indeed, Sandford argues that certain passages in Plato, frequently read as being *about* sex, actually *contest* our notion of sex as an obvious, natural, and transhistorical category. Sandford's goal in 'confronting particular passages in Plato's dialogues from the standpoint of a particular position in the contemporary philosophy of sex and gender' is 'to create a short circuit without a protective fuse' (pp6-7). In this way, *Plato and Sex* 'breaks' the two terms in its title apart not in order to critique or redeem the former (Plato) but to undermine the latter ('sex'). After all, as Sandford writes, 'It is "sex", not Plato's philosophy, which has to answer for itself today' (p7).

In Chapter One, 'Sex and Genos (Republic)', Sandford focuses on Socrates' arguments in the *Republic* with respect to female guardians. Feminist responses to these passages differ greatly, but all of them see Socrates' argument as employing or disputing the concept of sex that exists today. Socrates is thought to be saying that sex is irrelevant to what kinds of work a person can do; on this reading, sex difference, for Socrates, is limited to whether one begets or bears, and he is arguing against people who think that sex difference determines one's social role more generally. Socrates is thus seen by some scholars to be making an argument much like the one feminists would advance two thousand years later, and against similar kinds of resistance. In fact, however, Sandford points out that the word that is being translated as 'sex' in the relevant passages from the *Republic* is *genos*, which means 'kind'. No specific term for 'sex' existed in ancient Greek, and 'to translate *genos* as "sex" is therefore to introduce into Plato's dialogues a specification of the *kind* of kind that males and females or men and women are, when this specification is not linguistically marked in the texts themselves' (p23). In fact, *genos* is translatable as 'race', 'class', 'breed', 'stock', 'kin', 'offspring', or 'generation', among other terms (p22). In some cases, *genos* is used much like *eidos* (p23). Sandford further points out that when *genos* is used in the *Republic* to refer to men and women, it is always attached to one or the other, and does not ever function to refer to a class of distinction as the term 'sex' does. Thus, it is not just

that there is no word for 'sex' in ancient Greek, but that the word being translated as 'sex' did not function in ancient Greek the way 'sex' functions in modern languages (and this also holds true for the translation of *genos* as 'race', and so on).

Sandford is not making the nominalist claim that because the ancient Greeks did not have a word for 'sex' they did not distinguish between males and females or realize that males and females perform different roles in sexual reproduction, for of course they did. Sandford's claim is the subtler one that the absence of a word in a language versus its presence in another is 'intriguing and may sometimes be taken to suggest significant and interesting differences in their respective conceptual orderings of the world' (p25). There is a conceptual difference between *genos* and sex, Sandford is suggesting, that is being masked over in the translation of the former as the latter, and then in the interpretations of the translations that follow. The specification of the modern word 'sex' entails the view that reproductive ability is a privileged form of difference, one that is foundational of other kinds of difference (gender). Translating *genos* as 'sex' rather than as 'kind' makes reproductive difference a privileged kind of difference or categorization, when the generic word *genos* does not imply this. In a careful reading of the ways that the word *genos* functions in the passages in the *Republic* where it is translated as 'sex', Sandford shows that the Greek term does not in fact signify as the modern biological-natural concept of 'sex' does, and that the modern term carries a lot more baggage. 'Sex', for moderns, is what determines whether one is a man or a woman, not just what kind of reproductive function one's kind of body has.

Sandford's argument is that 'What Socrates (unlike modern feminists) must oppose in the *Republic* is ... not the presumption of the determining role of sex difference, but the presumption that women as a race (*genos*) are different - indeed opposite - to men *in every respect, in every aspect* of their "nature"' (p30). For the ancient Greeks, men and women were different social groups, and their physical differences (including different reproductive equipment) were the least of these distinctions, and not causal of the other differences. Because the differences between men and women were primarily social, rather than physical, it was much easier for the ancient Greeks to conceive of manly females and womanish males: female guardians would have been examples of the former, and warnings about the latter (that males could easily become women) abound in ancient Greek texts. Against this view that men and women differ in every respect, Socrates' radical claim in the *Republic* is that men's and women's distinct roles in reproduction are the only significant difference between them. Neither of these positions - the general ancient Greek position or Socrates' position - is the same as the modern notion of sex, which entails that the difference in reproductive role is foundational and causal of the ways that men and women do everything else that they do (parent, communicate, etc.). Like the ancient Greeks, then, moderns may think that men and women are entirely different (from Mars and Venus), but unlike the Greeks they think that this difference is grounded in sex difference or biology. This concept of sex difference as foundational was unknown to the Greeks. Neither Socrates' position nor the position that he is arguing against is the same as the modern view of sex, therefore, and modern feminist arguments against biologicistic accounts of sex difference are not mapable onto the discussion of Socrates and his interlocutors.

The remaining four chapters, which I will not enter into in as much detail, make analogous arguments with respect to other Platonic dialogues. They are similar in structure to Chapter One in so far as each provides a close reading of a passage or set of related passages in a

dialogue, as well as the twentieth-century debates to which these passages have given rise. Thus Chapter Two focuses on Aristophanes' mythical account of the origin of male and female human beings in the *Symposium*; Chapters Three and Four concern *eros* and the metaphor of pregnancy respectively in Socrates'/Diotima's speech in the *Symposium*; and Chapter Five takes up the mythical account of the origin of men and women in the *Timaeus*. While feminist debates about the passages in question are privileged in Chapter Four as in Chapter One, Chapters Two and Three provide an account of what we might call The Use and Abuse of the *Symposium* for Psychoanalysis. Chapter Five discusses interpretations of the *Timaeus* by R.D. Archer-Hind, A.E. Taylor, and F.M. Cornford, among others. In each chapter, the major argument is consistent: the modern natural-biological notion of sex (or, in Chapter Three, of sexuality) is being imposed anachronistically by the modern readers under discussion onto texts to which it is foreign.

Beyond this sustained thesis regarding the modernity and contingency of our notion of sex, Sandford makes a number of additional arguments in each chapter. Chapter One points out that even as it is part and parcel of our modern natural-biological notion of sex to see it as foundational of gender and sexuality, our practices belie our belief: if we trusted sex to be foundational, we would not make the efforts that we do to enforce heteronormative gender roles and sexualities. This point interestingly extends that of Harriet Taylor Mill and John Stuart Mill in *The Subjection of Women*. Chapter Two argues that both Lacan's and the modern natural-biological notion of sex is ultimately as mythic as Aristophanes' account of the cosmic origin of male and female. Chapter Three suggests that we not only impose the modern baggage of 'sex' onto *genos*, but that we (Freud being exemplary) also impose our modern ideas about sexuality onto *eros*. Chapter Four argues that the metaphor of pregnancy in the *Symposium* is best read as fantasmic in structure. Chapter Five reads the highlighted passages in the *Timaeus* as a cosmo-theological account of the moral inferiority of women that the Greeks took for granted; the terms 'man' and 'woman' in this dialogue are to be understood as moral categories disconnected from 'male' and 'female.' Such a reading resolves what have been perceived as impossible contradictions in the text.

Finally, in 'Coda: The Idea of "Sex"', Sandford concludes by arguing against a Platonic metaphysical understanding of sex. By this point, it goes without saying that sex is not a Platonic Form. Instead, it is to a (modified) Kantian metaphysics that Sandford turns in order to conceptualize the philosophical status of our understanding of 'sex'. Sandford offers the intriguing argument that 'sex' is best thought of as a regulative idea, an idea of reason not to be encountered in nature, as Kant specifically described 'race'; for Sandford, 'sex' (and 'race' for that matter) is not a *necessary* regulative idea, however, but, as her book has shown, historical. Michel Foucault is footnoted here (and this is his only appearance in Sandford's book), since he develops the idea of an historical a priori in *The Order of Things*. Like Foucault's argument regarding the historical a priori, Sandford's book demonstrates that an idea can be our imperceptible lens on the world, structuring what we see (and how we read), even while it remains transitory and contingent.

Beyond the concept of the historical a priori, it is worth noting the arguably Foucauldian nature of Sandford's project as a whole: while her work is rigorously grounded in close readings of historical texts, the focus of the author is not antiquarian but political and contemporary. Ancient texts are not of interest for their own sake, but in so far as they can be used to disrupt the seeming naturalness and inevitability of the present. The modern natural-biological idea

of 'sex' is a case in point: so natural and inevitable does this idea seem, Sandford's book shows, that we project it onto the past, and onto our readings of Plato more specifically. This, as Foucault argues in 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', tends to be how we do history; the purpose of genealogy, however, is to do history otherwise, without assuming or projecting continuities between the present and the past, but instead seeking out dissonances, rediscovering the battles through which our reality (our *a priori*) was made. The fact that 'sex' has become part of our historical *a priori* makes it difficult to dislodge - it is now infrastructural - however a first step towards such a dislodging is to demonstrate, as Sandford's book does so convincingly, that this concept did not always exist in the past, and thus need not always exist in the future.

Sandford's project can also be described as Foucauldian in so far as it does not ask What is sex? or, Does sex exist? but, as she explains in her introduction, *How* is 'sex' functioning in discourses? and What is the *history* of 'sex'? (p3) This is philosophy as history as politics. Sandford thus provides us with fragments of a genealogy of 'sex', a bit as Foucault - also turning to the ancient Greeks - was providing fragments of a genealogy of sexuality at the end of his life. While Foucault read authors such as Plato in order to show the possibility of a world without 'sexuality', Sandford reads Plato to show the possibility of a world without 'sex'. For Foucault, the Greeks (like the Eastern traditions of *ars erotica*) offered evidence that we can approach sexual pleasure in an ethico-aesthetic rather than a psychologico-medical-moral manner; while for Sandford the Greeks show that we can approach sex difference through a lens other than the natural-biological one, such as mythically. Needless to say, this does not mean that we should reactivate a Greek sexual aesthetics or recuperate *their* myths. Like Foucault, Sandford does not study the Greeks because she thinks they had things right, but to help us dispense with illusions from which they never suffered. It is precisely by realizing that these illusions (of sexuality, of sex) were not theirs, that we realize that they need not be ours either. Sandford, like Foucault, destabilizes our faith in the inevitability, naturalness, and correctness of our lenses on the world, because this is necessary to begin remaking that world.

Sandford's book is a groundbreaking work in feminist philosophy. It will naturally be of particular interest to feminist (and non-feminist) scholars of classical philosophy, and it provides an excellent introduction to feminist interpretations of Plato's dialogues. As noted, however, Sandford's project is firmly grounded in a politics of the present and in contemporary feminist debates about sex difference, sexual difference, gender and sexuality, making it essential reading not just for students of ancient Greek thought, but for feminist philosophers in general.