

SHOW ME THE MONEY: THE CULTURE OF NEOLIBERALISM

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Angus Burgin, *The Great Persuasion: Reinventing Free Markets Since the Depression*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2012, 303pp; £22.95 cloth

Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, Cambridge, Mass., Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011, 360pp; £22.95 cloth

Daniel Stedman Jones, *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2012, 418pp; £24.95 cloth

The question implied by the title of Colin Crouch's *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism* - the need to understand how the ambitions of neoliberalism appear to have been strengthened by a devastating crisis in its very heartlands - lies behind the host of recent histories of the movement. Yet whereas Crouch, a sociologist and political scientist, answers the question by pointing to the monopolising centrality of financial corporations ('we are increasingly told to welcome "more market" in our lives but "more market" really means "more giant firms"') these historians turn to the archives in order to detail the origins of neoliberal thought and the nature of its transition into the mainstream of political life.¹ They share the assumption that neoliberalism's tenacity cannot be wholly accounted for by either the left's analysis of class elites nor by the right's proclamations about the self-evident efficiency of the market itself: they offer instead a reading of its historical development and complexity. Yet what is necessarily left out from this historical approach - an understanding of how neoliberalism migrated into the discourses and mimetic assumptions of everyday culture - is also key to understanding its longevity. By way of a conclusion to this review, then, we will contrast these historical accounts of neoliberalism with a brief survey of 'post-crash culture': of the novels, plays, documentaries and artworks that offer a different kind of political commentary for neoliberalism's role in the contemporary moment.

One of the most celebrated of this recent clutch of books is Daniel Stedman Jones' new and careful history, *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics*. The first chapters of the book spell out neoliberalism's philosophical beginnings, the middle trace the committed work of those 'ideological entrepreneurs' and activists who gave it cultural form and substance, and the final give an account of its political breakthrough in the early 1970s and hegemonic success in the following decade. Whereas the story told in the middle section of the book is now increasingly familiar, also covered by the work of Philip Mirowski and Angus Burgin, it is in Stedman Jones' accounts of neoliberalism's origins - both its philosophical debt to the thought of figures such as Karl Popper and Ludwig von Mises and the nature of its initial entry into mainstream political debate - that his contribution to the field is most marked.²

In the book's first section Stedman Jones demonstrates how profoundly influenced the early writers of the movement were by their escape from 1930s Fascism and suggests that their

shared 'target was not simply collectivism or even, more simply, communism, socialism or Nazism. Instead they saw in the encroachment of state intervention on every aspect of social and economic life a creeping totalitarianism' (p36). Secondly, and probably more influentially, Stedman Jones argues that it wasn't this aversion to state intervention that first brought neoliberalism to the attention of those with elected political power but rather the political expedience of those governments faced with the apparent failure of Keynesianism in the early 1970s. It was the 'simple and optimistic message' of monetarism 'that a stable operation of monetary policy and a controlled expansion of the money supply would right all ills' (p223) that led to the rising credibility of Milton Friedman's economics in particular. Monetarism appeared in this context, Stedman Jones suggests, more as a choice between two types of government intervention rather than as the ascension of a philosophy that rejected this as an aim entirely. The book's detailed accounts of the economic decision-making in both the US and the UK in the 1970s argue that this neoliberal 'breakthrough' into mainstream policy-making came about through a series of ad hoc decisions, made by actors never entirely committed to the implications of their actions, and 'supporters and foes alike' have been erroneous in assuming 'in retrospect an ideologically consistent agenda' was at work (p271). It was only in the mid-1980s, under Reagan and Thatcher, that a neoliberal marketisation of the state was implemented and the redistribution of wealth from the public to the private sector, from the very poor to the very rich, began in earnest: although even here Stedman Jones thinks that these 'probably weren't' the 'intended effects' (p338).

What is oddly missing from this historical account, especially given the magnitude of the current crisis, is a parallel narrative concerning the relationship between neoliberalism and the burgeoning growth of the financial sector from the 1970s onwards: a sector that made state intervention on behalf of anything but the markets so hard to meaningfully effect, even if it rarely made this explicit claim for itself. Stedman Jones' account of the events surrounding the ending of the Bretton Woods agreement in the early 1970s, for example, captures both the accuracy and the limitations of his methodological emphasis upon historical verisimilitude rather than longer-term political analysis. In many ways Friedman's rather tangential role in Nixon's decision to end the gold window fits perfectly with Stedman Jones' depiction of the influence of neoliberalism as expedient rather than ideological in this moment. Friedman had been making the case against fixed exchange rates since the mid-1950s and was heeded only in a moment of economic crisis for which he appeared to offer a solution and, even then, his advice was followed only partially, as Nixon accompanied it with the wage and price controls that Friedman so openly abhorred. Yet, at the same time, Stedman Jones accepts Friedman's own account of his support for this shift - 'the case for floating exchange rates rested on their own merits rather than on liberal ideology' (219) - rather too readily and fails to point out that this was also the moment in which both financial speculation and deregulation received their most vital fillip, as currencies became commodities and the ability of governments to influence them was radically diminished. Friedman himself was a well-versed and active advocate of these consequences, writing supportive articles for Leo Melamed (who was campaigning to open the first market in financial futures at the Chicago Merc) and castigating Nixon for failing to fully embrace his recommendations in his infamous *Playboy* interview. By including Friedman's conversations only with policy makers, rather than with the financiers who were effectively and actively attempting to inhibit their political authority, Stedman Jones gives a

curiously one-sided view, not only of Friedman's role in this key decision but also of its longer term political implications.

Burgin covers similar territory to Stedman Jones: tracing the roots of neoliberalism to the 1930s, to an incipient network of isolated opponents of the broad Keynesian economic orthodoxy that emerged in the wake of the Wall Street Crash with the widespread conviction that unregulated markets had failed. In Europe a number of intellectuals voiced the fear that the spread of central planning would lead to the erosion of individual liberty and thus the encroachment of totalitarianism into Western democracies. In the United States a cluster of economists at the University of Chicago - principally Frank Knight, Henry Simons and Jacob Viner, although at this stage they did not constitute the coherent Chicago School that developed in the 1950s - developed a parallel set of arguments about what they saw as the New Deal's excessive government interference in the economy. Burgin shows how the two strands of thought began to come together with the 'Colloque Walter Lippman' held in Paris in 1938 to discuss Lippman's *An Inquiry into the Principles of the Good Society* (1937), a clarion call for neoliberalism that found a small but enthusiastic group of supporters on both sides of the Atlantic. This work was disrupted by World War II and it was the publication in 1944 of Hayek's apocalyptic warning *The Road to Serfdom* that set the stage for the first meeting in 1947 of the Mont Pèlerin Society, named after the Swiss hotel in which thirty-nine men and one woman met for a week-long intensive gathering of the self-consciously intellectual elite.

Using archival resources Burgin expertly documents the surprising success of the Mont Pèlerin Society, which after a decade had grown so unwieldy that Hayek seriously considered disbanding it. The story Burgin tells is one of friendships and intellectual affinities, but also one of personal animosities, internecine struggles and theoretical clashes. His contribution to the burgeoning study of neoliberalism is a focus on its intellectual creation that, at least before the 1950s, was more technical and philosophical than political in its outlook and he concurs with Stedman Jones in outlining how the conflicts between these individuals produced no fully articulated political agenda: they 'were largely united in what they opposed but shared little agreement in their attempts to construct an alternative vision' (p121). Burgin shows how most early neoliberal proponents assumed that there were many areas of life (such as regulation of monopolies) that markets could not be left to sort out on their own; likewise many were pessimistic about the kind of society that would result if the masses were left to fulfil their desires through consumerism and majoritarian democracy. He also emphasises how neoliberal thinkers were keen to distance themselves from the heartless, Spencerian excesses of laissez-faire, while at the same time remaining alert to the values of tradition and culture that the more extreme forms of market radicalism threatened to sweep away. With the arrival on the scene of Friedman, the brash young economist from New Jersey, Burgin's account takes an abrupt about turn. Although present at the very first meeting in Switzerland and initially in sympathy with the Mont Pèlerin Society's revisionist liberalism, we learn how Friedman's view later hardened into a more outspoken defence of laissez-faire, along with a conviction that free markets produced not merely a more efficient society but a more moral and just one. Friedman steamrollered his way through the internal disputes that had begun to cripple the Mont Pèlerin Society in the 1950s and 1960s, with the result that the organisation itself became less important than the man who would become its president in 1970. Burgin shows how Friedman's overwhelming sense of self belief, coupled with an increasingly savvy media

presence that combined an optimistic populism with a flurry of practical policy proposals, changed the character of the Society in particular and the neoliberal project in general from a rarefied transatlantic philosophical rethinking of nineteenth-century liberalism to a gung-ho promotion of the market as the solution to all known problems. The irony, then, is that Friedman's version of neoliberalism ended up rubbing off many of the nuances of the carefully articulated revision and moderation of nineteenth-century liberalism that the founding members of the Mont Pèlerin Society had laboured so painstakingly to craft. Why his cruder defence of free markets achieved more traction in the public sphere than the earlier, more even-handed formulations still needs explaining, however.

Burgin flies the flag for intellectual history in general and the history of economic thought in particular, noting that the historiography of modern conservatism in the US has tended to interpret it as intellectually incoherent (if no longer explicitly pathological as earlier historians had insisted), its rise only to be explained in terms of political manoeuvring. Burgin is therefore keen to take the origins of neoliberalism seriously in all their complexity, variety and contingency, even if 'the precise meaning of the term remains unclear' (p57). At the same time he insists that the emergence of neoliberalism is inexplicable without an account of the organisational structures that enabled those economic disputations to take place. After all, before the advent of jet travel for the masses, a week long meeting in a Swiss resort for transatlantic intellectuals didn't come cheap (as Stedman Jones notes, it was the deregulation of the airline industry in the late 1970s that led - initially at least - to cheaper fares and higher profits, and was hailed as the signature policy success for neoliberalism). Burgin details for example how the Volker Fund, a legacy of a Kansas City furniture manufacturer, bankrolled the travel expenses for the American attendees at the initial meeting in Mont Pèlerin, while Hayek and the Society's secretary worked tirelessly to persuade businessmen in each locale the Society gathered in to subsidise the considerable costs of the meeting: 'the Volker Fund and the Mont Pèlerin Society,' Burgin jokes, were 'the venture capitalists of the intellectual world' (p175). Burgin provides enough detail of the institutional support to sustain his story of the surprising success of the Mont Pèlerin Society, but his narrative at times becomes bogged down in the minutiae of internal squabbles, and loses sight of the relationship of the Society to the wider landscape of right-wing think tanks and conservative movement funders.³ More significantly, however, this account, like that of Stedman Jones, does little to explain how market fundamentalism gained not just a political foothold by the 1970s but also seeped into the wider cultural consciousness. The saturation of market populism into broader realms of intellectual and popular culture has been told more convincingly, for example, by Thomas Frank's *One Market Under God* (2000), as well as by Adam Curtis's compelling BBC documentary series *The Trap: What Happened to Our Dream of Freedom* (2007).⁴

This question is more obviously at the centre of Daniel T. Rodgers' *Age of Fracture*. Rodgers is less concerned than either Burgin or Stedman Jones with explaining and defining the particular political power of neoliberalism: the book features the word itself twice, and then only in passing. At the centre of this history of social thought in the United States since the 1970s, however, stands an economic ideology that is unmistakably that of neoliberalism: 'Faith in the wisdom and efficiency of markets, disdain for big government taxation, spending, and regulation, reverence for a globalized world of flexible labour pools, free trade, and free-floating capital' (p75). Rodgers is specifically interested in the ways in which this prevailing

ideology has set the tone of intellectual debate across an array of disciplines, casting it as a revolution in economic thought that initiated the 'fracture' of a mid-century intellectual consensus grounded in models of monolithic blocs: geopolitical alliances, social classes, racial groups, gender constituencies. In the last quarter of the century, under the pressure, first of all, of 'notions of flexible and instantly acting markets', these 'imagined collectivities shrank' (p5, p3). In their place emerged 'conceptions of human nature that stressed choice, agency, performance, and desire' (p3). If 'ideas moved first in the arena of economic debate' (p11) (here Rodgers offers his own version of the story of how Chicago School monetarists and free marketeers capitalised on the malaise of stagflation to lay Keynesianism to rest), these ideas were soon echoed by new ways of thinking in other fields of intellectual inquiry: legal and social scientific models couched in terms of rational choice and optimal resource allocation; accounts of race, gender, and sexuality that imagined personal identity as fluid, multiple, elective, and performative; resurgent strains of libertarianism, localism, and pluralism in political discourse; and understandings of the historical past as open to endless renegotiation, contestation, and appropriation.

Rodgers indicates, then, that the seismic fissure that inaugurated the age of fracture occurred in economic thought, and that each subsequent tremor elsewhere in the intellectual landscape was in some way an aftershock of this initial quake. A question that his account invites, but whose legitimacy he resists, however, is: what deeper tectonic shifts led to these intellectual convulsions? Rodgers is willing to countenance David Harvey's and Fredric Jameson's influential claims that the answers to this question lie in the 'deep structures of the late-capitalist economy', specifically in the transition from 'corporatist' Fordism to 'flexible accumulation, with its much shorter time horizons, much shallower institutional investments, and global extension' (p9). Rodgers ultimately, however, refuses to acknowledge the primacy of such materialist explanations. Responding to scrutiny of his causal model in a recent forum on *Age of Fracture*, he articulates a position that is the very model of equivocation: 'Which foot moved first? Did the economic transformations of late capitalism set loose these new debates? Or did ideas move first? My response is neither and both'.⁵ That economic base and intellectual superstructure are mutually implicated and constitutive is hardly, of course, a position from which the likes of Harvey and Jameson would demur. But Rodgers' argument is an instructive illustration of why it is important to hold on to the Althusserian notion of determination by the economic base in the last instance, for without it the genie of idealism risks escaping from the bottle once again. Rodgers is of course right to reject the idea that 'arguments over selves and identities were ... simply a reflex of the world's capital markets' (p9). For his position of studied equivocation to hold, however, he would have to demonstrate that this statement is no more plausible than its equally baldly stated mirror-image: that the branching and proliferation of capital markets was simply an effect of arguments over selves and identities. If one claim is reductive, the other is, to put it bluntly, fanciful.

If Rodgers is not enough of a materialist, however, he is also not enough of a culturalist. He too has only a little to say about the role of cultural narratives, discourses, and representations in the dissemination, legitimisation, and naturalisation - but also the resistance, critique, and subversion - of neoliberal assumptions. Rodgers, however, makes some valuable movements in this direction, both by demonstrating how neoliberal claims were echoed in academic fields well beyond economics, and by considering how these academic debates found their way

into the wider public sphere. The brand of intellectual history that Rodgers practices in *Age of Fracture*, however, takes as its quarry things called 'ideas', whose natural habitat is the 'big book' (p13), the blockbusting academic/mass market crossover in the vein of Milton Friedman's *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962), Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock* (1970), Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), and Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History* (1992). To his credit, Rodgers demonstrates himself to be a sensitive reader of rhetoric, particularly in an excellent analysis of the category of the 'underclass' that entered American popular consciousness in the late 1970s. Indicating that ideas are not simply disembodied, reproducible units, but remain inextricable from the discourses in which they are articulated, Rodgers shows how - via an abyssal language of darkness, obscurity, chaos, and despair - even authors avowedly sympathetic to the plight of US society's most marginalised and impoverished citizens consigned those individuals to a space beyond understanding, agency, or assistance (pp200-202). *Age of Fracture* has some room for the 'tropes' that inflect social debate, then, but it has virtually none (as Rodgers regretfully acknowledges [p13]) for the ways in which the ideas that fill its pages are refracted through a panoply of other cultural forms: movies, TV shows, novels, and works of visual art, to name just the most obvious.

If economic and political history has provided one kind of narrative explanation for the contemporary, culture itself has provided quite another. Since the financial crash of 2008 the need to understand the ways in which neoliberal models of the market have entered the social has become increasingly pronounced. We want to conclude this review by surveying those cultural texts - the novels, plays, films and artworks - that have attempted to represent not the complex and nuanced history of neoliberalism but rather the meanings of its presence in our everyday lives.

The need to understand the ways in which the financial sector had taken hold of the popular imagination, to explain a society capable of an apparent self-destruction of its own economic well-being, was central to the novels that sought to fictionalise the 2008 financial crash. These books, which include Sebastian Faulk's *A Week in December* (2009), Marina Lewycka's *Various Pets Alive and Dead* (2012) and, most notably, John Lanchester's *Capital* (2012), explore the crash by illuminating the centrality of finance to all aspects of British society.⁶ The novels formally reference those powerful realist chroniclers of nineteenth-century capitalism, Charles Dickens and Anthony Trollope, as they demonstrate a desire for a Lukácsian totality, a longing to resist the individualism that the 'age of fracture' has brought about. Hence alongside the very rich financial classes and the very poor working classes the novels illuminate the connections between a cast of contemporary archetypes: the radicalised Muslim, the safely exoticised Eastern European beauty, the self-serving politician, the highly-paid international footballer and, of course, the banker at the centre of it all. Yet the crisis that engulfs this latter figure, which provides all three novels with one of their central denouements, is personal rather than political or economic. The 2008 financial crash is merely a backdrop for a reckoning that denies a systematic critique of the financial crisis whilst also resisting a purely individualised one. Hence, on the one hand, these novels offer a pastiche of realism, one that perhaps corresponds to that which Mark Fisher has dubbed 'capitalist realism', a co-opted version of reality that denies the Real. But, on the other, their concern is neither with the individual nor with capital but with a society rendered adrift by an emphasis only upon these two things. The bankers are also the victims of the 'unlimited license' that the Žižekian Fisher assigns to late

capitalism, a failure of the superego function which produces only 'misery and disaffection'.⁷ What is most strikingly shared in these novels, as in other realist post-crash works such as Alex Preston's *This Bleeding City* (2009), Adam Haslett's *Union Atlantic* (2010) and Jess Walter's *The Financial Lives of the Poets* (2010), is the need for their male protagonists to re-assume the paternal role that capital has allowed them to abandon: to redeem masculinity itself.⁸ One of the most effective accounts of the role of finance in the crash is, conversely, Robert Harris' *The Fear Index* (2012), a popular thriller telling the story of the brilliant billionaire physicist who has devised a 'learning algorithm' capable of beating all markets.⁹ The destruction of the world's economy that comes at the novel's end is wreaked by this artificial intelligence and allows Harris to provide a parodic critique of the dangers of the financial performativity, described by economic sociologists such as Donald Mackenzie and Michel Callon, in which the technical formulae of financial economics do not merely describe the world of options pricing but create the market in their own image. Harris' critique also encompasses the emotional resolution of the realist novel: the computer is a gothic double of its creator, a stand-in for the child that has been lost, its embryonic image turned into etched glass art by its artist mother, before it was born and the novel even begins.

Whereas novels have sought to address the failure of a social totality Hollywood has preferred the certainty of documentary in its attempts to narrate the story of the Credit Crisis, as if the fictions of finance (in which a quadrillion dollars of derivatives are exchanged every year, ten times the value of all manufacturing goods produced throughout the world in the last century) undermine the need or even the possibility of fictional engagement with this world of shadow banking that has largely been hidden from sight. *Inside Job* (director Charles Ferguson, 2010) and *The Flaw* (director David Singleton, 2011) are the pick of the bunch, both providing detailed accounts of the wider origins of the sub-prime crisis; the latter in particular relates the specific woes of 2008 to a longer history of neoliberal deregulation of the financial services industry, and the connection between the stagnation of real wages for the majority to the increasing use of house equity to make up for the shortfall in domestic finances. Where Hollywood has tackled the financial crisis in fictional format, it has tended to produce rather flat results, such as *Margin Call* (director J.C. Candor, 2011), and *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* (director Oliver Stone, 2010), a bloodless companion to Stone's earlier, turbo-charged yet conflicted indictment of neoliberalism, *Wall Street* (1987).

Given the attention that the performativity of finance has received, not only by economic sociologists but also by cultural critics such as Judith Butler, it is surprising that the theatre has only slowly cottoned on to the possibilities of finance as a subject. David Hare's play *The Power of Yes* (2009) provides a respectable effort to explain the complexities of the sub-prime crisis, although it lapses into lengthy disquisitions at a blackboard by characters mouthing the words of Myron Scholes and George Soros. More promising is Lucy Prebble's *Enron* (2009), which captures the sense of the smoke-and-mirrors trickery of finance with its own flamboyant stage-craft, ranging from layers of projected imagery to the rendering of the company's Special Investment Vehicles (nicknamed 'raptors' by Andy Fastow, the CFO) as actual velociraptors, beasts lurking in the basement of the shadow bank that Enron had created. Most interesting of all is Clare Duffy's recent production of *Money: The Game Show* (2013) which takes the apparently serious moral question asked by a film such as *Margin Call* (if you were a banker, what would you have done?) and makes clear with an exuberant satire that the premise of the

question itself is faulty. The play is simultaneously framed as a narrative of the crash and as a game show, and it provides its audience with a comprehensive analysis of the crash whilst also asking them to literally participate in the visceral pleasures of gambling that the system was based upon, using the £10,000 in pound coins piled up on the stage floor. The play's ending, with an actor moribund in a leather chair, face drenched in a ketchup-feigned suicide, literalising the metaphor of a zombie bank that cannot be killed off, captures, like few other texts, the abject anger experienced by many in regard to the crisis.

Yet, not surprisingly, it is in the art world that a profound ambivalence toward a neoliberal valorisation of the market as the supreme arbiter of value has taken hold most violently. The beauty, pathos, daring, and dissent that once radiated from a Munch, a Picasso, or a Bacon is more and more obscured by the tens of millions of dollars for which such works change hands, passing from one oligarch or financier to another. Much contemporary art, meanwhile, seems barely to exist beyond its price tag: Damien Hirst's skull (*For the Love of God* [2007]) may be the ultimate neoliberal artefact.¹⁰ Yet many important works of contemporary art attempt to reflect seriously, if necessarily equivocally, on their own intimacy with the whirlwind of bids, deals, and auctions, and on the wider neoliberal, financialised economy of which the art market is an increasingly prominent part. Our own interest in such work has led us to curate an exhibition of visual representations of finance, both contemporary and historical.¹¹ The works of recent decades that especially intrigue us are marked, on the one hand, by a critical attitude towards the dominance of deregulated, deterritorialised capital and, on the other, by an anxiety that, in the wake of neoliberalism, 'the market' might be simply too vast, sprawling, and anonymous to apprehend, represent, or resist. The trading floor photographs of Andreas Gursky, for example, picture scenes of frenzied human activity weirdly geometricised into labyrinthine networks; the photographs of Michael Najjar and the installation works of Lise Autogena and Joshua Portway at once mock and affirm the naturalness and sublimity of financial markets by mapping their fluctuations onto mountain ranges or the constellations of the night sky; Claude Closky's and Gordon Cheung's appropriations of newspaper stock listings repurpose, without entirely neutralising, impenetrable grids of financial abstraction; Goldin+Senneby's intricate combinations of installation, narrative, and performance evoke a mystifying 'offshore' world in which any attempt to 'follow the money' results in an endless deferral of closure; and the pencil diagrams of Mark Lombardi trace the webs of collusion, cronyism, and corruption that subtend the 'transparent' and 'efficient' market of neoliberal myth, whilst leaving the viewer always, necessarily, too far away to see the detail, or too close to see the whole. For all that they open up suggestive channels of critique, then, major works of contemporary visual art that engage with the financial flows unleashed by the neoliberal revolution mirror a prevalent sense that neoliberal conditions are at once intolerable and inescapable.

Notes

1. Colin Crouch, *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism*, London, Polity, 2011, p52.

2. Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe (eds), *The Road from Mont Pèlerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2009.

3. The broader relationship between business and conservative politics has recently been ably documented by Kim Phillips-Fein in *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan*, New York, Norton, 2009.

4. Thomas Frank, *One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism, and the End of Economic Democracy*, New York,

Doubleday, 2000.

5. Daniel Rodgers, 'A New Consensus', *Historically Speaking* 12, 2, (2011): 21.

6. Sebastian Faulks, *A Week in December*, London, Vintage, 2009; Marina Lewycka, *Various Pets Alive and Dead*, London, Penguin Fig Tree, 2012; John Lanchester *Capital*, London, Faber and Faber, 2012.

7. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, London, Zero Books, 2009, p80.

8. Alex Preston, *This Bleeding City*, London, Faber and Faber, 2009; Adam Haslett *Union Atlantic*, New York, Atlantic Books, 2011; and Jess Walter, *The Financial Lives of the Poets*, New York, Harper Collins, 2010.

9. Robert Harris, *The Fear Index*, London, Arrow Books, 2012.

10. See Paul Crosthwaite, 'What a Waste of Money: Expenditure, the Death Drive, and the Contemporary Art Market', *New Formations* 72, (2011): 80-93, <http://doi.org/ctmsds>.

11. 'Show Me the Money: The Image of Finance, 1700 to the Present' will open at the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art in Sunderland in May 2014. For more information, see <http://imageoffinance.com/>. For an overview of some of the exhibition's themes, and discussions of some iconic images, see our 'Imagining the Market: A Visual History', *Public Culture* 24, 3, (2012): 601-22.

POWER FOR PLEASURE

Lisa Downing

Margot Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality*, Durham & London, Duke University Press, 2011, 315pp, \$24.95 paperback

In this timely work, Weiss interrogates the purported transgressiveness of BDSM subcultures and practices using ethnographic research methods and the insights of feminism and queer theory. BDSM culture is understood, not as a utopian realm of free expression that escapes the influence of everyday life, but rather as 'a formally organized community with very particular social and educational practices' (p5), which is shot through with 'often-invisible race and class privilege' (p5). The mention of 'circuits' in the subtitle of the book alludes to the key thesis Weiss propounds: namely that the BDSM lifestyle and the neo-liberal marketplace exist in a relationship of mutual interdependency, rather than the former offering any kind of inherent critique of, or challenge to, the latter. And, more broadly, Weiss's circuitry imagery suggests that sexuality is always in a relationship with economic and social power structures and hierarchies, rather than lying beyond them. Indeed, for Weiss, 'although sexuality is imagined as a break from material social relations, sexuality is, instead, the raw material of these circuits' (p230).

The research that led to this book involved Weiss's thorough submersion as a participant observer in the Bay Area BDSM scene. Weiss attended a number of events such as play parties, munches (social events where sexual acts are discouraged), clubs, fund-raising auctions such as the 'Byzantine Bazaar', and educational classes. She worked as a volunteer archivist for the Society of Janus. She also interviewed sixty-one participants whose interviews form the basis of the data on which she draws in analyzing the subculture, its practitioners, and its practices. Weiss establishes a dichotomy (that some scholars, such as Gayle Rubin, would likely question) between the 'old guard' and 'new guard' of BDSM participants in her field. The 'old guard' describes the gay leather men who lived in the Folsom Street district of San Francisco prior to the AIDS crisis and the area's gentrification, and who are seen as now existing on the margins of mainstream consumer culture. The 'new guard' comprises younger players who self-identify largely as heterosexual, bisexual, or pansexual; are internet-savvy and often employed in the IT sector; and are heavily consumerist in lifestyle and sex-style. Weiss is particularly interested in how much money these 'new guard' BDSMers spend on toys, costumes and other paraphernalia, seeing in the financial commitment to the scene the players make one of the main ways in which 'SM produces both subjects and communities' via engagement in 'consumer practices' as well as the acquisition of 'SM techniques' (p111).

The argumentational thread drawing together the various analyses in *Techniques of Pleasure* is the idea that the alternative scene of BDSM is alternative only in very limited ways. It fails, for example, to exclude mainstream prejudices and stereotypes; indeed it shores up many normative assumptions about gender, heterosex and race, replicating, at the very least, the *appearance* of systems of oppression within the community space. Describing the various participants in the Byzantine Bazaar, she asks 'how do we read the political effects of ... selling

black bodies at a pretend slave auction in front of an almost exclusively white audience?’ (pp5-6). Yet, Weiss also reported some disquiet and demurring among the audience at the spectacle of the black woman offered ‘for sale’ by her white ‘master’, suggesting that the question she poses is already - at least implicitly - working on those participating in the community. That the problem of race remains implicit, however, is returned to in Weiss’s Chapter 4, where she explores the similarity between BDSM dynamics and mainstream sexual and relationship norms. Many players interviewed by Weiss, keen to insist upon the transgressiveness of BDSM and to reinforce the boundary between it and its vanilla counterpart, articulated concern that, too often, heterosexual BDSM partnerships take the form of dominant men and submissive women in a constellation that seems to ape the heteronormative stereotype and the patriarchal power dynamic. Yet, Weiss notes that disparities in class and race between dominant and submissive partners remain largely absent in such discussions of the politics behind BDSM fantasy. Weiss writes: ‘For heterosexual male dominants and female submissives, the fact that their BDSM seems to replicate normative constellations of sex-gender sexuality appears problematic; that this normative gender is also racialized and classed does not’ (p145). If Weiss is correct in understanding the BDSM imaginary as a microcosm of wider (in this case American) society’s own political concerns and weak points, this insight may be an important one.

Weiss questions the validity of those arguments proposing that BDSM scenes can never be understood as wholly separate from real-life situations of inequality, given that, in a workshop on interrogation scenes, the pro-domme workshop leader Domina recommends that her students look online (giving Amnesty International’s website as possible source) for inspiration for play scenes. Nazi uniforms are ‘not PC, but they are powerful’, Domina is quoted as saying (p21). Weiss’s aim throughout her study is never to chide or condemn the BDSM activity, but to identify the nature of the relationship it produces - or reproduces - between the players, the community, and the world that lies outside the scene. Weiss analyses the interrogation scenes as connecting ‘individuals with social and national imaginaries, and private fantasies with culturally legible social hierarchies’ (p23). Her conclusion is that while such scenes are certainly ‘effective’ (she describes the various emotional reactions she herself experiences while watching a staged abduction and interrogation scene in the course of the class, from anger, to arousal, to discomfort), ‘they are not necessarily political, much less emancipatory’ (p24).

In terms of her theoretical and methodological influences, Weiss asserts early on that she is ‘departing from a Foucault-inspired analysis of the radical alterity of BDSM practice’ (p6). However, Weiss does Foucault a disservice in ascribing to him a wholly celebratory view of BDSM. While he may have waxed utopian about the *activities* (‘bodies and pleasures’) found in same-sex leather scenes, he warned precisely against the danger of allowing such scenes to solidify into stable communities, with attendant identities, for many of the reasons Weiss identifies to do with consumerist mainstreaming and the co-option of pernicious norms. (When Weiss’s participants describe ‘lifestyle’, ‘heavy’ and ‘experienced’ BDSMers as distinct from ‘bedroom’ or ‘newbie’ players, asserting an authentic and ‘proper’ BDSM identity, this is an example of Foucault’s - unacknowledged - warning in action.) And while distancing herself from what she perceives as Foucault’s over-investment in SM, Weiss’s analysis of the central concept of ‘techniques of pleasure’ is evidently underpinned by a consummately Foucauldian understanding of self-improvement sought via the mastery of practices (see especially chapter 2).

Many BDSM enthusiasts will not welcome Weiss’s apparently killjoy arguments that their

lifestyle is both a part of the capitalist machine and complicit in broader societal sexism, heterosexism, and racism. Similarly, some will raise objections that, in mounting a critique of BDSM's subversiveness dressed in the language of academic theory and from the subject position of an anthropologist (albeit a 'queer, SM-friendly', non-BDSM-practicing one), Weiss downplays the degree to which committed BDSM participants are already aware of, and working through, the problems she highlights regarding the proximity and inextricability of fantasy, SM play, and real instances of social injustice. Others may state correctly that the debate played out in the book is not all that new - that radical and material feminists have long offered the class-based argument that BDSM merely replicates the heteropatriarchal dominance-submission paradigm, against the claims of those such as Rubin that eroticizing power differentials effectively challenges, by facing head-on, the dynamics of inequality (or in Weiss's words constitutes 'resistance through reiteration', p188). Whereas Weiss asserts that she replaces such binary analysis with a more complex 'performative materialist methodology', in fact, the two contradictory political positions remain in play throughout much of her analysis, with her argument broadly favouring the class-based critique over claims for the emancipatory or transformative power of BDSM.

However, such credible reservations aside, this book is valuable in offering a clearly articulated corrective to several too-common received ideas about sexuality in general and BDSM in particular that it is in nobody's interest to leave intact. First, it challenges the notion that sexuality can ever be a wholly personal or psychological matter, untouched by social relations and regulations. This is a belief that is problematically pervasive in neo-liberal culture and in branches of so-called 'choice' feminism. In a climate in which 'choice' as a concept is so privileged (and so problematic), the importance of analyses of the kind Weiss undertakes cannot be overstated. Secondly, Weiss's study demonstrates that applying a coda of 'safe, sane and consensual' to community activity cannot, in and of itself, guard against either the encroachment of systemic inequality and prejudice into the scene, or individual instances of coercive behaviour. The insights of Weiss's book thereby chime helpfully with recent activism undertaken from within pockets of the kink scene that aims to highlight the prevalence of abuse that take place under the cover of BDSM, such as Kitty Stryker's and Maggie Mayhem's 'Consent Culture' project. In debunking some myths that continue to surround BDSM, Weiss contributes to an honest and nuanced conversation about how power dynamics really work within a scene that plays with power for pleasure.

FORTY WINKS

Scott McCracken

Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*, Gregory Elliot (trans), London, Verso, 2012, 120pp; £12.99 paperback

Never fear old lefties, the age of revolution is not over, merely experiencing a temporary break in service. Sit tight and stay faithful, because already the auguries of change are among us. This is the message of Alain Badiou's *Le réveil de l'histoire* (2011), 'The Reawakening of History', published in English as *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings* (2012). *Le réveil* is the sixth in Badiou's series of polemics, *Circonstances*, where the French philosopher takes time out from his big works such as *Being and Event* and returns to his first love, contemporary politics. The series began with *Kosovo, 11 septembre, Chirac/Le Pen* (2003), the second was, *Irak, foulard, Allemagne/France* (2004), and the third, *Portées du mot 'juif'* (2005). There followed a brilliant and very funny attack on Nicolas Sarkozy, *De Quoi Sarkozy est-il le nom?* (2007), and then the more sober, *L'Hypothèse communiste* (2009). The publication of the series in France has coincided with Badiou's growing visibility in the English speaking world, a visibility that is in part thanks to Peter Hallward's excellent introduction and sympathetic critique: *Badiou: a subject to truth*.¹ With *The Rebirth of History*, all the volumes bar the latest, *Sarkozy: pire que prévu, les autres: prévoir le pire* (*Sarkozy: worse than expected. The others: expect the worse*)² have now been translated: the first three under one cover, *Polemics*, in 2006;³ while *The Meaning of Sarkozy* and *The Communist Hypothesis* both came out in 2010.⁴

Is Badiou's late popularity justified? One French acquaintance of mine cynically puts it down to the fact that most of the other *soixante-huitards* are dead. But while there might be a Darwinist element of truth in this analysis, it is unfair. Badiou is a gifted political polemicist. Unlike the professional controversialists employed by the British press, Badiou uses contemporary events to return to and make accessible the philosophical concepts developed in *Theory of the Subject*, *Being and Event* and *The Logics of Worlds*. At the same time, he has developed a plausible historical analysis of the Left's current weakness and its prospects for the future. There is a tautness to his sentences, a robustness to his ideas, and a bracing impatience with the shibboleths of the liberal left that makes Badiou work always an enjoyable, if slightly unnerving, read.

Le réveil d'histoire is no exception; and indeed, it may come as something of a relief to those who have followed the series. *L'Hypothèse communiste* ended on a rather a downbeat note. In it Badiou systematically took apart all the organisations that had sustained socialism, in both its oppositional and its 'actually existing forms', during the twentieth century: the political party; the trade unions; the Stalinist state, and so on. The bereaved reader could only ask whether there was anything left? No, came the answer, communism no longer has any material form. It had been reduced to an idea only, a hypothesis, no more than a flickering candle to be carried forward as a dim light into the darkness of the future. But in *Le réveil*, published just two years later, things are already looking a little brighter.

The event that turns up the dimmer switch for the socialist dawn is the Arab Spring, but

Badiou is also heartened by disturbances in France and England, which presage the end of what he calls 'the painful years of an intervallic period' (une période intervallaire) (p53). But an interval between what? For Badiou, history since 1789 has been marked by periods of revolutionary activity and 'intervals'. In the Sarkozy volume, the two long ups were from 1792 to the defeat of the Paris Commune in 1871 and from 1917 to a last flurry of militancy between 1966 and 1975. The long down was between 1871 and 1917 and in *The Communist Hypothesis* Badiou suggested that since the late 1970s we have been experiencing a similar period of quiescence.

As Engels pointed out during the Second Empire one of the characteristics of such periods is a general amnesia about earlier moments of insurrection⁵ and one of the advantages of Badiou's 'ups' and 'downs' is that they provide an easily graspable framework within which the political struggles of the twentieth century might be remembered. In this respect, defeat can be an opportunity for reflection. Nor is Badiou's framework as broad brush as my initial summary suggests. What distinguishes a long up in Badiou's historiography is not the absence of downturns, and certainly not the absence of reaction, but the presence of an organised political resistance. In a long down, power becomes comfortable in the absence of an opposition organised around an alternative vision. Badiou is joyously and effectively scathing about the European parliamentary Left's abandonment of an alternative and its capitulation to the new world order. But as gratifying as this is to read, once he has jettisoned the existing Left and all its traditional forms of organisation, the question still persists: What remains?

As Badiou repeats in all his publications, the abiding duty of the philosopher is to remain faithful to revolutionary events in which the truth of an alternative vision was made manifest. 1792, 1871, 1968 and, deviating from orthodox Marxism, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, are all such moments for Badiou. Events when something that was invisible, at least for the ruling ideas of the period, suddenly manifested itself as a material force. It is not so much that the event comes out of nothing, but that neither its existence nor its potential register prior to its emergence. The event creates not just 'new possibles', but the 'the possibility of possibles',⁶ a well of potential that may not be realised, but could be. The attempt to express this potential leads Badiou away from crisp polemic to more opaque phrasing, for example: 'an event is the fate of the real as possible future of itself'.⁷ If this verges on the mystical, it is nonetheless seductive in a period when the vast energies of ideological production are engaged in trying to tell us that this is how things were always going to turn out, that all the political experiments of the last 200 years (except of course liberal democracy and the free market) were aberrations. Understanding that things could have been different is the first step in a recognition that things will not always be as they are now, and that the seeds of change may already be present.

Part of the success of Badiou's polemics is that they shock the reader into such a state of recognition. In this respect, the volumes of the *Circonstances* series have the effect of a good poem or work of art. They make us see the world we live in differently. They change our view of the past and they herald a different future. But what heaven or hell beckons? The cover of *Le réveil* bears an abstract design. The more lurid cover of its English translation shows a young man, standing in front of billowing flames, a scarf half concealing his face. Riots, Badiou suggests, are the guardians of a lost history of emancipation during the long down. He defines three categories of disturbance: 'Immediate Riot', 'Latent Riot', and the 'Historic Riot'. The riots in the *banlieues*

of French cities in 2005 or the English riots in the summer of 2011 are examples of Immediate Riots: 'violent, anarchic and ultimately without enduring truth' (p21). They are localised and do not fundamentally disturb power. The Latent Riot takes things further: it indicates the possibility of a new politics, without actually being able to realise it. The uprisings of the Arab Spring have reached the third category: they are Historical Riots. They have endured. They have moved beyond the local to the point where the crowd gathered in Tahrir Square starts to be seen as representative of the Egyptian people as a whole. The Historical Riot, which may, as in Tunisia, begin with an Immediate Riot, makes the transition from the possibility of a new politics to the reformulation of the idea of what that politics might be.

If this is Leftist wish fulfilment, and subsequent events in the Middle East have suggested Badiou's hopes are a little premature, he is at least adept at removing the fig leaves that cover the nakedness of power. Consider, for example, his concise definition of what is meant by 'the West':

We call 'Western' the countries which proudly call themselves by that name: countries historically situated at the leading edge of capitalist development, with a vigorous imperial and bellicose tradition behind them, still equipped with an economic and financial strike force that allows them to purchase corrupt governments the world over, and with a military strike force which enables them to intimidate all potential enemies of their domination (p47)

Very enjoyable, but grizzled, armchair socialists might feel less comfortable with Badiou's Platonic notion of truth, which emerges from the fulfilled Historical Riot, and has the potential to carry over into the revolutionary event. Badiou has little time for democracy as it is practised in the West, which in much of his writing it is equated with a sham. The latest volume in his series, *Sarkozy: worse than expected. The others: expect the worse*, is a ninety-three page diatribe against the 'illusion' that voting ever does anything but entrench the oligarchies for whom parliamentary democracy is a cover. For Badiou, the bearers of truth are not the majority of voters, but the minority engaged in rising up. Truth belongs to the one million in Tahrir Square, not the other seventy-nine million Egyptians. It belonged to those in the street in 1968, not those who voted for a conservative government in the elections called by de Gaulle.

In Chapter 6 of *The Rebirth of History*, 'Riot, Event, Truth', truth is carried by a "popular dictatorship" ... *an authority that is legitimate precisely because its truth derives from the fact that it legitimizes itself*' (p59). For those anxious not to repeat the mistakes that followed the October revolution, three elements of Badiou's political philosophy, revolution as Messianic event, the duty of the 'Bolshevik' minority to speak for the 'general will', and his defence of the revolutionary terror will at the very least create unease and at most provide an excuse to dismiss him altogether. As attractive as Badiou's invitation that we join him in a wager with the future might be, his faith that the event to come will spontaneously bring forth necessary and legitimate forms of collective political organisation seems to postpone and evade the complex problem of organising a Left alternative now.⁸ It is for this reason that Badiou's harshest critics see him not so much a product of 1968, but a throw-back to the worst excesses committed in the name of the enlightenment in the twentieth century.

However, there are at least three reasons why, despite these problems, Badiou should not be dismissed out of hand.

1. The Czech historian Miroslav Hroch has said that he used to think that post-Cold War society had lost its ability to imagine an alternative to globalised capitalism because it had lost its sense of history. Now he thinks that the decline in the sense of history is because we can no longer imagine a future.⁹ It is certainly true that the defeat of the Left has made it very difficult to imagine any future that is not either the same as now or worse. Badiou's concept of 'a wager with the future' offers a way to commit to an alternative in the face of widespread apathy; and that wager becomes even more necessary in a society of consumption where at every click of the mouse our needs and desires are counted, tracked, and mapped in a vast project to make them predictable for the corporations from whom we buy.

2. Even if Badiou's philosophy probably does work best as a form of modernist aesthetic, a kind of Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, which shocks the reader out of his or her acceptance of the way things are, it still a useful corrective to the widespread disillusion with politics as it is, a disillusion that can only fuel the populist and racist right. If we find some aspects of his politics unsettling that is partly because disagreeing with them has the unsettling effect of throwing the onus back on the reader. If, instead of putting our faith in the truth that will emerge from the event to come, we feel we need first to build a movement with the capacity for organisation of the Bolsheviks, the internal democracy of the Greens, the community activism of the Liberal Democrats or Sinn Féin, the commitment to diversity of the new social movements, and the links to organised labour of the old mass parties of the working class, then hadn't we better get out of our armchairs and do something about it?

3. The left has tended to oscillate between two opposing positions on violence. It has either fallen in love with its creative destruction or shied away from it all together. If Badiou's fidelity to a revolutionary 'truth' is uncomfortable, then how much more realistic is the more comforting belief that national and global inequalities will be overcome without violence? Disagreeing with Badiou's defence of a 'popular dictatorship' means engaging in the difficult task of arguing for institutions and political organisations that have the capacity to channel demands for change and ensuring that they do not simply become part of the old system.

Badiou's polemics, in other words, are, as polemics should be, good at posing the right questions in fresh ways for new times and for new audiences. We can leave it to less exciting writers to point out that it might be a bit late to leave our political choices to the new world to come, or that engagement now might involve compromise and making do with what remains of the old politics. Badiou is a worthy philosopher for our times, but although there are some similarities between his thought and that of an earlier thinker, Walter Benjamin, it is worth remembering that while Benjamin was also attracted by a notion of messianic time, he found illumination in the odds and ends of the everyday, in 'splinters', not in one transformative moment. The truth arrives, Benjamin suggested, not in one eventful package, but in bits.

Notes

1. Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

2. Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, Paris, Lignes, 2012.

3. Alain Badiou, *Polemics*, Steve Corcoran (trans), London, Verso, 2006.
4. Alain Badiou, *The Meaning of Sarkozy* and *The Communist Hypothesis*, both London, Verso.
5. Engels' letter to Marx, 18 Dec 1868, *MECW*, volume 43, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1987, p191.
6. 'Un événement est la création de nouvelles possibilités. Il se situe, non pas simplement au niveau des possibles objectifs, mais à celui de la possibilité des possibles', *L'Hypothèse Communiste*, op. cit., p191.
7. 'On pourrait aussi dire qu'un événement est l'advenue du réel en tant que possible future de lui-même', *ibid.*
8. The post-Leninist, post-Maoist, post-Party group that he was involved in from 1985, Organisation Politique, restricted itself to small-scale interventions on specific issues, notably the exploitation of migrant workers without papers, and has now disbanded.
9. Miroslav Hroch, 'Learning from Small Nations', *New Left Review*, 58, (July-August 2009): 58.

IDEATIONAL CINEMA

Jarad Zimble

Keya Ganguly, *Cinema, Emergence, and the Films of Satyajit Ray*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2010, 258pp

It is simple enough to say that art is a kind of thought, that poetry or music or cinema are ways of knowing the world, but since claims of this nature are often accompanied by critiques of instrumental reason, their precise meaning is more difficult to get at without collapsing back into abstraction. In one way or another, however, what is usually called form is considered important, and given form's historical character, the explanation that follows must inevitably articulate what is thought not by art in general, but rather by the works at hand, situated within particular horizons of meaning.

This, more or less, is the approach adopted by Keya Ganguly in her study of the cinema of Satyajit Ray, in which she sets out to show how 'his works do not so much *reflect* historical, aesthetic, or cultural problems as present critical, dialectical conceptualizations of the continuities between art and experience' (p18). The key word here is 'conceptualizations': Ganguly several times insists that Ray's aim was neither to transcribe an authentic India, nor escape into the pleasures of free play promised to the cosmopolitan auteur, but instead 'to *think with the cinema* (as opposed to thinking *about* it)' (p27). For her, as indeed for Ray, Cinema should thus do more than give back our view of reality: it should affect our sense of the world and our manner of envisioning it.

In a study that aligns itself explicitly with immanent critique, greater weight might have been given to Ray's own writings on cinema, where he shows himself an acute critic of his own and others' works. Instead, Ganguly's heaviest debts are to Soviet film theory, especially Eisenstein's, as well as to figures of or associated with the Frankfurt School, whose chief representatives here are Benjamin, Adorno and Kracauer. By its own admission, the book 'is driven by the Frankfurt School's insistence on a critical negativity toward matters of culture and aesthetics' (p205). This does not mean however that its conceptions of modernity and the relationship between life, art and truth are simply carried over and applied to Ray's films. On the contrary, Ganguly insists that Ray himself is implicated in critical theory's moment and elaboration, and his films allow her to push against and work over ideas sometimes circumscribed by metropolitan literary and cinematic traditions. Thus, she claims that Ray's cinema is true to Benjamin's articulation of the allegorical and utopian but not to his Messianic or 'idealized horizon of meanings' (p73), whilst *Devi* prompts a re-alignment of Roland Barthes with Eisenstein's 'activist mode of thinking' (p101), and *Jalsaghar* gives evidence that there are contexts in which, *contra* Adorno and Eisler, ciné-music need not reject communicability altogether.

Yet Ganguly's principal aim remains an understanding of Ray's cinema as 'what Eisenstein had called "an ideational cinema" - a conceptualization of the world rather than a representational reaction to it' (p26). What kind of thinking does Ray's cinema in fact do? What does it know about the world, and how? First and foremost, Ray's cinema knows the

badness of a contemporary reality constituted by global capitalism, a reality in which visuality has been prioritised and from which other forms of experience have been stripped away. It is precisely because of this prioritisation that Ray's reflexive probing of visuality becomes a critique of modernity itself, or at least a means of confronting those contradictions of modern life that cannot be resolved by art alone. Often, this entails bringing visuality into relation with residual and slowly disappearing modes of experience, for which reason Ray's films frequently choose settings in the past. In this regard, Ganguly attributes great importance to Reinhart Koselleck's notion that 'any given present is at the same time a "former future"', and explains that Ray's thinking about the past involves thinking about what the present has failed to be, and what it might yet become, an approach she reads as utopian through-and-through (p37).

If these are the book's broad arguments and concerns, each of its chapters focuses on a single film, a particular cinematic element or practice, and a certain feature of contemporary life. Beginning with a 'manifest content' that has occupied previous critics - that Bimala is a depthless character, that very little actually happens in *Charulata* - Ganguly attempts to bring out what Adorno calls the 'truth content' of the works. Thus, *Ghare Baire* is read not as 'a tragic portrait of feminine subjectivity' but as an 'allegory about the redemptive potential embedded in catastrophic figurations' and the 'withering of subjectivity under capitalism' (pp28, 58); and *Charulata* becomes a meditation on 'the impossibility of action or, for that matter, activism in a world ... drained of energy' (p63), as well as a 'reflexive commentary' on 'the problem of visual alienation in modernity' (pp29, 72).

Alongside these explorations of catastrophe, emergence and the historicity of experience, Ganguly writes also of *Devi*'s '*configurational thinking*' about 'the excesses of religion' and 'the seductions of reason', in a context in which 'religious belief and secular ideals have equally been turned into instrumental, fetishistic modes of habitation' (pp100, 112); of the role of music in *Jalsaghar*'s exploration of 'forms of gesturality and aurality' and hence 'forms of pleasure and perception' that 'have been all but obliterated by the reality effects in and of film' (pp139, 149); of *Mahanagar*'s imperfection as a materialisation of 'the straitened circumstances of its production' and a means of 'reintroducing viewers to material contingencies of viewing itself' (pp165, 170); of *Apu Sansar*'s intimation of 'life's essential contingency' by its reflection on 'the camera's fundamental indifference to animate and inanimate objects' (pp185, 183); and, finally, of the shift 'from optimism to a darker, brooding vision' across Ray's oeuvre, which is evidence of a growing 'sense of modernity as the experience in which instead of the unexpected, it is the inexorability of the expected that must be suffered and narrativized' (pp197, 199).

By and large, the readings build upon notions addressed by critical theory. For example, we find Benjamin's writings on allegory and *Trauerspiel* in chapter 2, Eisenstein's and Barthes's writings on montage in chapter 3, Adorno and Eisler on composing for films and the non-identity of music and image in chapter 4. This certainly whets the edge of analysis, especially when recourse is had also to Ray's own writings. Yet the most compelling moments are often those in which Ganguly gives some sense of the cinematic or even artistic contexts for Ray's experiments, as she does in explaining how Ray, by means of the contrast between 'The heavy ornamentation of *Devi*'s mise-en-scène' and 'later shots of the denuded countryside', exposes 'the useless expenditure and sensationalism of mainstream Indian cinema,' and thereby attempts 'to defamiliarize audiences and to distance them from their mental images

of Hindu deities derived from popular films' (pp124-25). Similarly, in analysing Ray's use of music, particularly in *Jalsaghar*, she contrasts it with 'mainstream cinema' in which 'popular adaptations of musical and dance traditions ... managed to transform both classical and folk practices into mere spectacle, parasitically deriving their attraction from earlier traditions while diluting their appeal' (p132), and in her reading of *Mahanagar*, she draws out Ray's preoccupation with the bareness of reality by setting his cinematic practice in relation to the 'expressionist extravaganza' of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, in contrast with which '*Mahanagar*, in its deliberately stripped-down style, conveys its own impoverished cultural predicament' (pp162, 164).

It is no coincidence that some of the book's key insights come when Ganguly sets Ray's works against the texts from which he draws his narratives (*Ghare Baire*, *Charulata*), or the films of his predecessors and peers (*Devi*, *Jalsaghar*, *Mahanagar*), for in this way Ganguly sketches the horizons of possibility that make sense of Ray's decisions and give them the impression of necessity. For the same reasons I find less compelling those readings that give more weight to the inherent capacities of film as such and where claims about form remain at the level of generality, the most jarring instance of which is the proposition, taken over from Kracauer, that film is a 'constitutively open-ended form' because 'Unlike other modes of storytelling, the raw materials of life are ... not *consumed* in their representation by the camera, only *exhibited* by it' (p182).

This unevenness in approach is likely the consequence of the fairly casual way in which Ganguly treats the notion of the relatively autonomous field of cultural production. She certainly acknowledges its value, but it remains one of the very few under-theorised elements in her study. Does this matter? No, for the most part, given that, in practice, Ganguly looks closely at Ray's engagement with other film-makers and at his cinematic craft, his attentiveness to narration, to juxtaposition of shots, to framing, to pacing, to the relationship between image-track and sound-track. But it does highlight a tension in the work: between a commitment to relative autonomy on the one hand, and to a strong claim for Ray's modernism on the other. For while the former is a necessary premise of any argument for the truth content of art, the latter entails understanding Ray's achievement in the broadest terms, and principally as a reflexive, discontinuous and ironic critique of the material conditions of capitalist modernity. The danger here is that reflexivity, discontinuity and irony come to be viewed as inherently valuable and efficacious - which cannot be if form is understood historically - whilst other qualities of the work, even the most distinctive, are cast into the shadows. The further danger is that, when the context of intelligibility is taken to be capitalist modernity as such, it is so far broadened as to obviate relative autonomy. The end of all technical decisions is then critique and we return to the familiar base-superstructure conception of the relationship between economy and art.

Yet the problem of how to acknowledge both the world systemic nature of global capitalism and the relative autonomy of cultural production is hardly straightforward. It has been at the heart of several recent attempts to move postcolonial theory forward and is central to a critical conversation to which Ganguly's study is an important and early contribution, and which has more recently been joined by a group of critics whose interest in 'peripheral realism' corresponds to Ganguly's interest in 'peripheral modernism' (p176).¹ Nor should this be viewed as a problem of the local and the global, or a means of promoting the notion of 'alternative modernities',

which Ganguly rightly rejects. Rather, it is a problem of context and horizon, about the ways in which not only films but also works of literary, visual and musical art have meaning and effect. A problem, that is, not of materialism, but of how we understand art's materials. For if Ganguly is right to propose that 'a material aesthetics privileges, somewhat literally, the *material* of the cinema itself,' it remains a challenge to us today to pose the question: 'What is materialism's material?' (p194).²

How then to evaluate the broadest aim of Ganguly's study of Ray, which is to 'examine the utility of a conception of modernism and the avant-garde ... for understanding the nature of his visual experiments' (pp1-2)? In the case of the avant-garde, which Ganguly says 'represents neither a set of known artists nor a historically delimited artistic experiment alone but an overall *outlook*', a drive towards innovation in art and thought 'set against a backdrop of global social ferment and upheaval', Ray's oeuvre certainly *is* illuminated (pp20, 3). As for Ray and modernism, it seems the gain here is rather on the side of the latter than the former. It is modernism, in other words, that is clarified by means of Ray's oeuvre, rather than the other way round.

As a viewer and reader of Ray's films, Ganguly displays rare critical acumen. The basis for choosing certain films and ignoring others is never wholly clarified or made explicit, though some choice was inevitable and there can be little argument with the importance of those preferred. It is only to be hoped that Ganguly's study will spur future scholars to explore further and with as much rigour and sophistication. Certainly, the book is a boon to anyone interested in Ray or Indian cinema or postcolonial cinema, and a significant moment in the project of thinking about art within the world's horizon.

Notes

1. Jed Esty and Collen Lye (eds), *Peripheral Realisms*, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 73, 3, (2012), <http://doi.org/115f>.

2. Ben Etherington, 'What is Materialism's Material? Thoughts toward (actually against) a Materialism for "World Literature"', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 48, 5, (2012): 539-551.

THOUGHT-PERCEPTION BEYOND FORM OR, THE LOGIC OF SHAME

Raji Vallury

Timothy Bewes, *The Event of Postcolonial Shame*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2011, 224pp

Few books published recently in the field of postcolonial studies can rival the virtuosic brilliance of Timothy Bewes' *The Event of Postcolonial Shame*. Dense, challenging and thought-provoking, the work's dazzling erudition, which combines highly inventive readings of an impressive array of philosophers, writers, literary and cinematic texts, opens new critical inroads into the relation between ethics and aesthetics. Bewes' central thesis is that shame constitutes the event which gives material form and expression to the irresolvable tension between the ethical and the aesthetic that is the hallmark of postcolonial literature, indeed of all modern writing. *Pace* Joseph Conrad, Bewes defines shame as 'the experience of a prolonged incommensurability between a form and a substance . . . in a world of desolate unintelligibility' (pp2-3). Shame in other words, is the text's formal articulation of its ethical, political and representational inadequacy. Sartre's insight into the 'shameful' structure of perception, which destabilises the encounter between the subject of knowledge and the object of its comprehension, functions as Bewes' analytical point of departure, while Hegel, Lukács, Adorno, Badiou and Deleuze provide the conceptual tools needed to theorise a practice of postcolonial writing 'freed from the shaming, subtractive consciousness of a being who writes' (p192). True postcoloniality, or freedom from the shame built into the very structure of colonialism: such is the radical thought to which Bewes' book attempts to give form. Illuminating the paradoxically inseparable distances, gaps and dislocations between the subject and object of perception, form and event, revolutionary potential and realisation, aesthetics and ethics in the works of writers such as Joseph Conrad, T.E. Lawrence, V.S. Naipaul, Nadine Gordimer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, J.M. Coetzee, Caryl Phillips, and Zoë Wicomb, *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* seeks to reformulate critical enquiry within postcolonial studies 'not positively, by the presence of certain cultural motifs, identity formations, historical struggles, or emancipatory goals, but negatively, by an incommensurability that is materialized whenever such presences are produced or named as the object or the subject of a work' (p7). As I will suggest a little later, the luminous clarity of Bewes' negative critique, which posits the necessary conjoining of shame and form, and which attempts to shed light on the event of shame as 'a modality of thought that cannot adequately be accounted for by language, or reduced to what is expressible in language' (p14), risks leaving the political in the dark by underscoring failure as the constitutive measure of the success of literature and by privileging the ethical as 'a permanent *rendering inadequate* of form' (p19).

As mentioned earlier, shame is the literary form that emblematises the gap within the perceiving subject, 'between the I as experienced by the self and the self as it appears to and is reflected in the eyes of the other' (p24). Bewes deconstructs the ontology of the subject that sustains Sartre's formulation of the perceptual relation that engenders the structure of shame (a

formal relation that cannot be viewed as an ethical response to political inequality, but must be seen as a determinant condition built into the very apparatus of power), by arguing for shame as an experience of the dissolution and evacuation of the self. The vector of this process of de-subjectification, as Bewes demonstrates through his Deleuzian reading of Lawrence, is the negation of perception (and perceptibility) towards nothingness and abstraction (p36). The impossibility of representing the dissolution of the self towards imperceptibility finds formal expression in the shame of the postcolonial novel, of shame as the form of the experience of perceptual dissonance and discrepancy (p46). Invoking Lukács' definition of the novel as the form of the age of 'absolute sinfulness' (p44), Bewes describes shame as both the experience of incommensurability between a subject and the world, as well as the formal resolution of that discrepancy (p45). He then proceeds to raise one of the most important questions of the book: how does one think in the absence of form and how does one think the absence of form (p46)? This query serves as the fulcrum upon which hinge the true stakes of the book's 'postcolonial hypothesis': To conceive of and realise a revolution without betrayal, and to think 'the possibility of postcoloniality (that is to say, freedom) in circumstances in which it has not yet been achieved' (p101). Hegel, Adorno, Fanon, Badiou and Deleuze are summoned as building blocks for the elaboration of the radical heterogeneity between concept and form, between freedom and its instantiation. For Bewes, true decolonisation and postcoloniality, or freedom, can only take place through an abandonment of the metaphysics of fidelity and betrayal that undergird the idea of revolution as a project to be realised, an assumption that drives the very logic of the colonial enterprise (pp102-107). Following Adorno's reflection that Hegel's philosophy addresses itself to that which is unthinkable within predetermined forms of thought, Bewes underlines the startling similarity between Hegel and Deleuze: both philosophers attempt to conceptualise absolute, radical freedom by positing 'the possibility of a thought that would take place outside form, that is to say, a thinking *of* form as such' (p103). The concept of a thought that would be irreducible to a pre-given or existing thought-form, or a thinking that would be capable of thinking its disappearance, holds the key to understanding the paradoxical aesthetics, ethics and politics of writing produced in the wake of colonialism; complexities that Bewes unearths in persuasive fashion through close readings of a wide range of literary and cinematic texts. However, the varied instances of the colonial and postcolonial tensions that Bewes illustrates through his analyses may be crystallised within the following observation about Conrad: such forms of writing seek to express 'the indescribable *precisely in its indescribability*; the non-iterable *in its non-iterability*; the unconceptualizable *in its unconceptualizability*' (p110). Bewes' demonstration comes to a full circle: the disintegration of novelistic forms is nothing other than the formal expression of shame, where shame is the form that expresses the disjunction between thought and form, freedom and instantiation, revolution and realisation, aesthetics and ethics.

In the final and to my mind, most incisively brilliant chapter of the book, Bewes seeks to break the circle through the idea of a thought-perception liberated from the oppositional logic of identity and difference that informs subjectivity and human relationality. Conceding that shame is structurally immanent to perception, he proposes a form of perceptual thinking that would arise from a violent encounter with incomprehension, or a departure from pre-constituted categories such as subject-object, self-other, colonizer-colonized, '*percipere* and *percipi*' (p172). Invoking the Bergsonian notion of a pure perception that would extend beyond every form

given to human comprehension, as well as the Deleuzian principle of subtraction which would suspend subjective relationality in favour of the machinic impersonality of the nonhuman, Bewes constructs the concept of freedom as a thought-perception liberated from the formal logic of shame.

The Event of Postcolonial Shame has the singular merit of shifting intellectual debates within postcolonial literary studies away from the more commonplace discursive terrains of cultural identity, multiplicity, diaspora, hybridity, *créolité* and the like, towards a more rigorous investigation into the significance of the forms and structures of aesthetics and ethics in the aftermath of colonialism. The study however, raises some other questions. As stated earlier, the notion of political agency recedes into obscurity within an analytical framework that primarily examines writing as the locus of an irremediable tension between the aesthetic perceptibility and the ethical representability of freedom (pp140-141). 'What is most shaming about writing is its ability to abstract from the body, to sublimate sensation into ethical prescription' (p153). Lukács' insight that the novel is the form of the age of absolute sinfulness is pivotal to Bewes' elucidation of the form of shame, or rather, of shame *as* form. But as Lukács' reprisal of Fichte's observation shows, absolute sinfulness, which Lukács alternatively characterises as a world abandoned by God, designates the absence of a transcendence that orders and organises the signifying forms of immanence, and refers first and foremost to an age, an epoch, and a condition. The formal (but provisory and oft-repeated) resolution to the demonic power of contingency, or an immanence abandoned to itself, is irony. 'Irony' writes Lukács, 'consists in [the] freedom of the writer in his relationship to God ... Irony ... is the highest freedom that can be achieved in a world without God'.¹ By displacing a condition (sinfulness) onto a structural and formal solution (shame), Bewes paradoxically transforms the freedom of a structural form into a determining condition. While Bewes is careful to distance himself from the ontology of the subject that dictates the Sartrean logic of perceptual shame (of shame as perception itself), his analyses nevertheless seem to elevate the structure of shame to an ontological categorical imperative that would determine every available form of human perception, consciousness, and comprehension. Theorising shame as an unspeakable and unnameable event that would lie beyond the expressibility of language, but whose inexpressibility would find constant inscription as inadequacy within writing raises the 'affection-image' of shame (p175) to the quasi-transcendental status of an unsurpassable limit-horizon. Why shame ought to constitute the privileged category of analysis over other affections is not always clear. For Deleuze, the experience of shame opens lines of flight away from its reactive negativity towards the affirmative power of other affective or perceptual becomings. The mobile, vitalistic and material force of thought-perception in Deleuze tends to be blunted or obscured within a reading that valorises the logic of shame as an *ur*-event. As Deleuze argues in *The Logic of Sense*, sense is precisely the fourth dimension of language that makes possible the inherence and expression within language of the *aliquid*, the world of pre-individual, nonhuman singularities or events, becomings, and thought-perceptions that lie beyond the pre-given forms and significations of subjects, objects, bodies and things. Deleuzian sense, in other words, is the conceptual dimension that frees the potentiality, possibility and agency of thought-perception (or eidaesthetics) from the dialectical binary logic of possibility-impossibility, failure-success, speakability-unspeakability, and so on and so forth.

Confucius remarked that what interested him as a philosopher and thinker were not the

answers, but the questions. By framing and asking a set of fresh and inventive ones, Timothy Bewes challenges us with the task of creating a more rigorous intellectual engagement with the aesthetics and ethics of postcoloniality. *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* is a remarkable and stunning work of scholarship.

Notes

1. Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, Anna Bostock (trans), Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT Press, 1971, pp92-93.

CULTURE OR BARBARISM?

Benjamin Noys

Michel Henry, *Barbarism*, Scott Davidson (introduction and translation), London, Continuum, 2012, 168pp

Michel Henry's *Barbarism* was originally published in French in 1987, reissued in 2000, and now arrives in English translation. In many ways it arrives as a dead letter. It consists of a jeremiad against the dominance of abstract, Galilean science over the primacy of 'Life'. Such a protest hardly seems original, dating back at least to William Blake's contestation of Newtonian science in the name of 'living proportion', and on to the terrain of the various twentieth-century rebukes of science and technology from Heidegger to the Frankfurt School.

The emergence of Henry's work in translation now, however, makes his intervention more timely and perhaps more strange than it might first appear. In 2008 Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude* appeared in English as, in part, a robust and conceptually rigorous restatement of the Galilean worldview - that nature was a book to be read and its language is mathematics. Since then we have witnessed the seemingly unstoppable 'movement' of 'speculative realism', which has, in very different ways, restated the necessity for a consideration of science as a privileged discourse on a reality that is not limited to human access (this limit being what Meillassoux calls 'correlationism'). Various schisms and heresies have resulted from this initial construction of a tentative unity, but this dispersal has merely served to further the emergent hegemony of various forms of 'realism'.

This context makes Michel Henry's *Barbarism* perhaps the most explicit work of an enemy of this configuration. Henry is a phenomenologist, religious (specifically Christian), and unabashedly endorses Husserl's notorious thesis that the earth (as the very ground of experience) does not move. In particular, Henry singles out the Galilean mathematicisation of the world as his target of critique and as the origin of what he calls 'barbarism'. In a manner which I can only describe, from the clichéd position of the English, as very French, Henry states that he rejects the Galilean reduction in which: 'The kiss exchanged by lovers is only a collision of microphysical particles' (xiv).

Henry's argument is relatively straightforward. He contends that science is only one mode of appearing and Galilean science is a subset of this mode. They are both derivative and secondary to the originary mode of appearing, which is life. Life is the transcendental condition of appearing from which all other forms of appearance derive. This life is an immanent experience of self-relating - life 'feels' life, in the first instance. The 'auto-affection' of life is, according to Henry, dominated by two fundamental affective tonalities: suffering and joy. It is this primary experience of sensibility which shapes any appearing, but also means that we are irreducible to the world. Therefore 'life' is the absolute value, a point that Henry reiterates and explores throughout this work.

In the terms of Quentin Meillassoux we could say that Henry offers an *absolute* correlationism. While Meillassoux insists science gives us access to knowledge of a realm

prior to any consciousness, Henry's contention is that science can only be practiced by life and remains dependent on the body of the scientist. The second point of Henry's argument is that Galilean science is a reduction or elimination of this experience of life. The result is an experience of barbarism, because culture, which is the outgrowth of life, is subjected to the 'deadly' effects of science that 'kill' life. We are therefore faced with the choice: culture or barbarism?

After setting out this argument in some dense and often repetitive chapters, Henry turns to explaining why science should emerge from this experience of life. Why does life turn against itself? Henry's interesting argument is that the ontological suffering which is one of the tonalities of life leads to a desire to end that suffering by escaping from life. Science answers this desire to negate life, and so promises a kind of practice of 'suicide'. The idealities and abstractions of science, or Galilean science, perform, or try to perform, the elimination of life. In fact, the 'frenzy' of this project is that it can never quite eliminate its dependence on life, and so the pathos of constant struggle associated with science.

The rest of the book is concerned with detailing the effects of this barbarism. Perhaps the one that will be of most interest to contemporary academic readers is his discussion of the university. Henry's objection to the subjection of the university to external values of measure and market can only resonate, especially in the UK. Practices of assessment and measure, from 'eLearning' to evaluation, from the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) to the Research Excellence Framework (REF), make a reality of abstraction. The assessment of research for its 'impact' makes especially clear Henry's point about the danger to the humanities of an 'opening-up' of the university that subjects it to the forces of the market and the State. As anyone, which is nearly everyone, who has considered 'impact' in the humanities finds, the 'clarity' of the objectivity of science is a model that can hardly be resisted.

More questionable, if predictable, is Henry's critique of media, and in particular television. This is not because there aren't valid criticisms to be made, but because by posing them at the ontological level of a general 'barbarism' they become general, abstract, and, even, barbaric. The worst moment is when Henry suggests that watching the death of football spectators in a crush (presumably referring to the Heysel Stadium disaster in 1987) on television is a negation of life 'no different' from the usual act of viewing. This kind of hyperbole indicates, to put it mildly, the perils of 'ontological politics'.

While Henry is insistent his project is not anti-scientific, but about challenging a totalitarian Galilean science that lays sole claim to truth, what would another sort of science that was not barbaric look like? Henry discusses the necessity of art, ethics, and religion, but he provides little sense of what this 'other science' might be. This is crucial because various types of 'speculative realism', 'object-oriented philosophy', and 'new materialisms', insist that existing science has the qualities we might usually regard as aligned with the humanities: difference, variation, sensitivity, contingency, and so on. In this sense they could and would contest Henry's narrative on its own grounds - replying, in effect, that science has its own culture, and one remarkably more sophisticated and thoughtful than the so-called 'humanities'. In fact, we could trace a strange convergence whereby the religious value Henry gives to the suffering and joy of life is also displaced, by various new materialisms, into objects, the world, and matter. Rather than simple antagonists we could trace a common agreement in terms of a theological account of meaning, which is merely traded from the subject to the object.

In fact one sign of this commonality is that both Henry and certain currents in contemporary 'materialism' share a common suspicion of the politicisation of culture by the 'Left Humanities' (of which I would consider myself a member). They both object to what they regard as the reductive, predictable, political readings of culture, in which this politicisation of culture is a quasi-Stalinist attempt to police and control thought. The 'richness' of life, whether in subject or objects, is seen as antithetical to any reductive, political appearance. This indicates the common grounds within the seeming antagonism. Henry's calls for a post-Galilean science might then even be said to find their answer in this re-enchantment of science ... what, of course, would be excluded as a result is politics.

That said, although problematic, Henry's analysis of barbarism could be read in a rather different manner. While he focuses on a technological determinism Henry's discussion of the emergence and force of abstraction gains force in the light of the continuing financial crisis. Financial instruments, such as High-Frequency Trading, integrate cutting edge science into capitalism's 'barbaric' subjection of life to monetary value. These weapons of financial mass-destruction evade or exceed human capacities for cognition and control. It may be that Henry's phenomenology of the emergence and dominance of abstraction could be re-tooled as an instrument of critical reflection.

The difficulty that remains would be tracing back such 'barbarism' to life, and so to the normative and critical operator that powers Henry's project. In fact, Henry's own conclusion that technology destroys life speaks to this penetration and subsumption of life by capitalism, even as he tends to displace capitalism by technology. Therefore, against its own ostensible structure, Henry's project does speak, however hyperbolically, to our moment. The choice may not simply be between culture and barbarism, but to the more difficult political and cultural task of thinking our way out of this binary.