Talking to Tomorrow: Gillian Rose's Misrecognitions

Graham MacPhee

Gillian Rose, *Marxist Modernism: Introductory Lectures on Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, Robert Lucas Scott and James Gordon Finlayson (eds), London and New York, Verso, 2024, 152pp, £16.99 paperback

> *Spirit* . . . means *the drama of misrecognition* … – a ceaseless comedy, according to which our aims and outcomes constantly mismatch each other, and provoke yet another revised aim, action and discordant outcome.
> Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law* (1996)

Gillian Rose's thinking is arguably more relevant now than ever. For decades we've been told 'no more big ideas', to use Ian McEwan's pithy formulation.[1] But while the critical questioning of 'received truths' is indispensable, unfolding events point to the need for holistic frameworks of understanding, ethics and action – however revisable, self-critical and plural they may need to be. The global extension of neoliberalism; the hollowing out of social democracy and other spaces for human negotiation with capital; the growth of the anti-political nihilism of the far-right; and ultimately, the prospective collapse of organised human life on the planet through human-made climate change and environmental degradation: the remedies for all of these will require 'big ideas' in the sense of historically open and renegotiable conceptions of freedom, solidarity, justice, totality … and the good.

Rose, who died prematurely in 1995, was one of the few voices to challenge the postmodernist claim that holistic frameworks are necessarily metaphysical. She believed that revisable conceptions of justice, freedom and the good – the vocabulary of 'metaphysics' outlawed by 'post' theories – could be generated from historical experience without collapsing back into fixed essences or the inevitability of historical dialectic, an approach she called 'speculative thinking'.[2] Rather than a monological, linear progression – proceeding from non-identity to the fullness of identity, or from contradiction to reconciliation – Rose sees the continued interplay of identity *and* non-identity 'as the dynamic movement of a political history … expounded speculatively out of the broken middle'.[3] The 'middle', or space of negotiation, is always 'broken', or resistant to dialectical completion, because folded within it are different possible futures. Instead of the tragic finality of dialectical reconciliation, this implies 'a ceaseless comedy, according to which our aims and outcomes constantly mismatch each other, and provoke yet another revised aim, action and discordant outcome' (*Mourning Becomes the Law*, p72).[4] The failure of big

1. Ian McEwan, *Saturday*, Anchor, 2005, p74. See also Graham MacPhee, 'Postmodern British Literature and the Postcolonial', in Bran Nicol (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern British Fiction*, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming.

2. Gillian Rose, *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays*, Blackwell, 1993, p59. (Hereafter *Judaism and Modernity*.)

3. Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p71. (Hereafter *Mourning Becomes the Law*.)

4. See also Graham MacPhee, 'Hegel After *Ulysses*? The (Dis)Appearance of Politics in "Cyclops"', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 69:3, 2023, pp307-308, pp319-21.

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ideas allows us to revise and renew them, only for them to fail again; but the experience of failure and renewal *is itself open and revisable*, and retrospective re-cognition can modify and renegotiate the ends envisaged and the means they enable. In 'being at a loss', then, we are 'yet exploring various routes, different ways towards the *good enough justice*, which recognises the intrinsic and the contingent limitations in its exercise'.[5]

The seven lectures published as *Marxist Modernism* were delivered by Rose as part of the undergraduate course in 'Modern European Mind' at the University of Sussex in 1979, and so date from before the period in which she developed her conceptions of speculative thinking and the broken middle. The lectures provide an accessible and lively introduction to what was then a largely unknown set of topics and intellectuals in British universities: the response to aesthetic modernism in the German-speaking world by thinkers associated with the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, namely Georg Lukács, Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. As well as adding helpful footnotes to the lectures and interpolations to bridge gaps in the original recordings, the editors provide a short introductory essay which contextualises the lectures as part of the Frankfurt School's anglophone reception. The volume ends with an afterword by the prominent Frankfurt School scholar Martin Jay which, as we might expect, assumes a wider, more evaluative remit than do the editors in their introduction.

In part, this involves charting more clearly the gaps in knowledge about many of these thinkers – especially Walter Benjamin – which existed in anglophone scholarship in 1979, as well as Rose's interpretative slips and factual errors. But primarily, Jay seeks to place the lectures within Rose's subsequent intellectual trajectory, and so to pose and answer the elephant-in-the-room question which until this point has gone entirely unmentioned: as to why read (indeed, why publish) a series of undergraduate lectures by a scholar who on the volume's own account 'blaz[ed] a path in late-twentieth-century philosophy that few would follow' (p132) and whose 'writing remains comparatively understudied by wider audiences' (pviii).

The ostensible answer is that these lectures help chart 'the intellectual journey that culminated in [Rose's] mature work' (p134), but this doesn't ring true. Although Jay is very respectful of Rose personally, he is fundamentally unsympathetic to the intellectual project she developed through the 1980s and 1990s, especially the pivotal distinction she makes between 'dialectical' and 'speculative' thinking (*Judaism and Modernity*, pp53-63) – or between the 'tragic' and 'comic' (*Mourning Becomes the Law*, pp63-76). Jay cannot see in Rose's 'speculative thinking' anything other than a positive dialectics of 'reconciliation' or identity, as against Adorno's 'negative dialectics' orientated to 'non-identity'. Instead of Rose's comedy – the continued interplay of identity *and* non-identity – Jay can only envisage tragedy *with* a happy ending (reconciliation) or *without* one (negative dialectics). Which means that Rose's

5. Gillian Rose, *Love's Work: A Reckoning with Life*, New York Review of Books, 2011, p124, emphasis added.

subsequent writing can only be judged as a headlong dive into dogmatism, the embrace of 'an uncompromising version of speculative idealism' which 'insist[s] that reason and truth [are] immanent in reality' (p132). The trajectory Jay describes is stark and unequivocal: 'The young Rose favoured critical over speculative reason, outrage at social injustice over affirming the unending dialectic of law and violence, the promise of a different future contained in aesthetic form over believing eternity exists in the here and now for those with faith' (p143). There is, then, a 'good Rose' in the past, the one who delivered these lectures, and a 'bad', dogmatic one who authored her mature work.

In which case, the claim that the value of these lectures lies in charting this trajectory doesn't really make sense. If 'the intellectual journey that culminated in [Rose's] mature work' (p134) amounts to a collapse into dogmatic idealism, and if the lectures lack 'the knowledge we now have of the ongoing reception and subsequent history of Critical Theory' (p142), then there seems little point in returning to them.

But what if Rose's lectures might have something to say to our intellectual present that we didn't already know? An alternative approach would be to scrutinise 'what is striking and curious', to use Benjamin's phrase[6] – what doesn't fit with current orthodoxies or confirm established habits of thinking – in order to chart a different trajectory. Jay values the lectures for providing a spirited defence of Adorno, which on the face of it looks about right; but only if we ignore the difficulties, distortions and reiterations that feature so strongly as Rose circles around Adorno's powerful statement that avant-garde art and popular culture are 'torn halves of an integral freedom to which, however, they do not add up' (p86).[7]

The problem is that Rose takes this formulation seriously, which means that her exposition struggles to stay within Adorno's limits. As well as establishing the non-identity of these terms (the torn-ness that cannot add up), she also wants to maintain their identity (as halves of an integral freedom), which she does by arguing that 'Adorno was equally critical of so-called avant-garde art … as he was of popular art' (p114). Except that he wasn't, as is clear from her quotation from *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, which restates the opposition in the Marxian vocabulary of forces and relations of production:

> The forces of production [i.e. formal innovation] are displaced into high, quasi-privileged spheres … and therefore, even when they incorporate true consciousness, are also partly false. The lower spheres obey the predominant relations of production (p111).[8]

Adorno here betrays the speculative character of his statement of torn halves: whereas avant-garde art can still 'incorporate true consciousness' and so is only 'partly false', the culture industry is reduced to unalloyed obedience. The socially-critical and legitimating functions of art are opposed abstractly not dynamically, and the tension between identity and non-identity is frozen.

6. Walter Benjamin, 'Goethe's Elective Affinities', in *Selected Writings: Volume 1*, in Marcus Bullock and Michael V. Jennings (eds), Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996, p297.

7. Theodor W. Adorno, letter to Benjamin, 18 March 1936, in Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence: 1928–1940*, Henri Lonitz (ed.), Nicholas Walker (trans.), Harvard University Press, 2001, p130.

8. Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, E. B. Ashton (trans.), Seabury, 1989, p225.

'This notion of contradiction,' Rose reflects, 'is very odd' because instead of registering 'an inherently unstable situation' it renders it 'permanent'. Where 'Marx's notion of displacement was developed to explain social change,' she worries, 'Adorno seems to be developing a notion of social contradiction to explain why *nothing* is changing' (p112; emphasis in original).

If Rose bridles at these restrictions, at moments she slips up and gestures beyond them. While explaining how Adorno sees the unintelligibility of society as generating both the immediate intelligibility of the popular and the unintelligibility of the avant-garde, she rearticulates this opposition *speculatively*. Both avant-garde and popular, Rose tells us, relate to 'the illusions … that society is simply understandable when it isn't, *or that it's unintelligible when it is in fact intelligible*' – a double formulation that dynamises the torn halves by revealing their brokenness, the inherence of recognition within misrecognition and vice versa. Rose catches herself, wondering if she is staying true to Adorno – 'I don't know if I've got that right, but never mind …' (p113; emphasis added). But we *should* mind, for here Rose goes beyond Adorno. Torn halves do not add up, yet in speculatively encompassing identity *and* non-identity they cannot be fixed forever in the negative.

Jay claims to identify a 'young Rose' in the lectures who is quite removed from what he sees as the dogmatic 'speculative reason' of her 'mature work' (p143). But there are elements in the lectures that clearly anticipate her later critique of postmodernism and, contra Jay, underline her refusal of dialectical stasis or reconciliation. Given the self-imposed ban on metaphysics ('no more big ideas'), 'post' theories have instead had to pursue a performative ethics through the perennial cycle of deconstructing fixed essences. But as Rose was to object, this ignores that 'ethics and metaphysics are torn halves of an integral freedom to which they have *never* added up' and an ongoing negotiation between ethics and the language of metaphysics remains necessary to 'galvanis[e] the difficulty of thinking without generating any fantasy of mending the world – even less of mending the "two worlds"' (*Mourning Becomes the Law*, p9; emphasis in original). She warns that 'by disqualifying universal notions of justice, freedom, and the good, … "post-modernism" has no imagination for its own implied ground in justice, freedom, and the good' – and so this 'ground is … held in a transcendence far off the ground', divorced from the world and blind to the alternative possibilities which it has excluded from the outset (*Mourning Becomes the Law*, p7).

Verso is to be commended for making these lectures available. But the volume does a disservice by prejudging their relation to Rose's later thinking – ruling out the possibility that in addressing her students in 1979, she might also have something to say to us today.

Graham MacPhee is an honorary research fellow at the University of Manchester and the author of *Postwar British Literature and Postcolonial Studies* (Edinburgh University Press) and *The Architecture of the Visible* (Bloomsbury).