review

Cynicism and Postmodernity

Timothy Bewes

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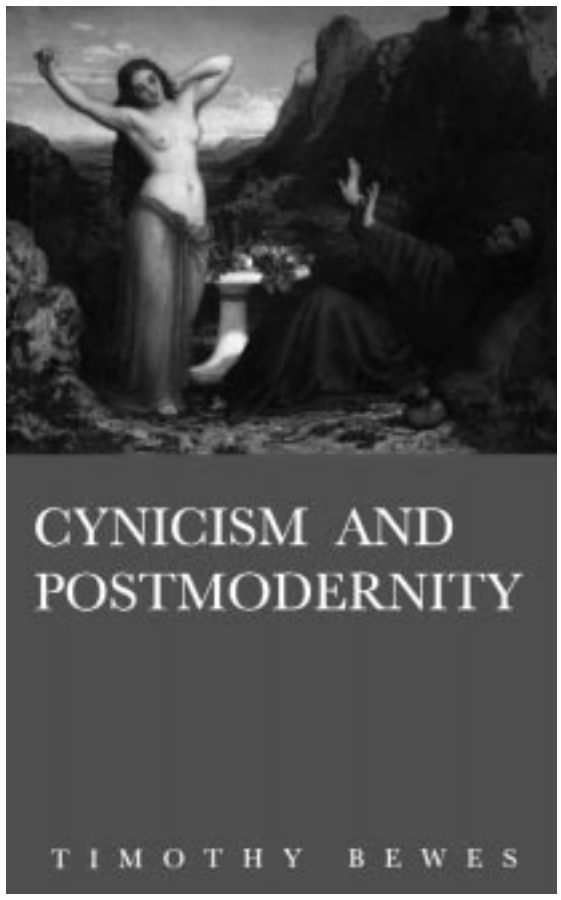

Woody Allen put it rather clearly when he exclaimed "Marxism is dead, feminism is dead, humanism is dead and frankly, I don't feel so good myself." We all know, and have for some time, that the grand narratives have collapsed, we all know that cynicism is the inevitable result of a loss of faith, and that a certain ironic wit and negativity is the only way to survive on groundless terrain. The only problem is that cynicism has gone from being a survival tactic towards becoming an end in itself. We have grown used to it and cannot let a political event, an artwork, a novel or even a relationship pass without a sneer of self-conscious irony.

Cynicism and Postmodernity marks the next turn in the spiraling tale of self-conscious postmodernity: the condemnation of cynicism and the rather contradictory project of subsequently trying to find a position from which such a criticism could take place. A kind of cultural criticism in reverse. A burst of well intended frustration and anger followed by confusion.

In this Timothy Bewes' first published work, his focus is on politics, the arena in which, he claims, postmodern cynicism has had the greatest impact and the most damaging effects. It sets out ambitiously to assess the impasse of postmodern thought and to re-orientate contemporary theory towards an active politics beyond cynicism and apathy. As such it is one of the many new publications in what is fast turning into a backlash against post-modernity.

Cynicism and Postmodernity characterises "post modern cynicism" as "a melancholic, self pitying reaction to the apparent disintegration of political reality," — a period of disillusionment with Grand Narratives and totalising ideologies. Postmodernism is seen by Bewes as a cynical reaction to the aims of enlightenment thought and modernity.

For Bewes, as for post-modernity's time served critics, Habermas and Norris and Eagleton; the postmodern is a temporal historic blip, a small upset or period of cowardice in the face of the difficult ascent of the enlightenment project. Postmodernity, in this view, is already pre-staged by Hegel, as a part of modernity: "the reification of a certain panic in the face of psychical violence and epistemological kinesis..."

According to Bewes, postmodernity is pre-staged and therefore dismissed in *The Phenomenology*, in which Hegel describes the possible responses to the violence of consciousness during its progression towards knowledge.

Paraphrasing Hegwl, Bewes diagnoses three distinct types of response to the fear of knowledge. These are characterised as "decadence, relativism and irony."

According to Bewes: "Hegel introduces and dismisses the intellectual credibility of these recognizably postmodern states of mind, symptoms of a crisis in the thoroughgoing skepticism of the healthy philosophical sensibility."

Postmodernity is then, seen as a period of inactivity, in which indulgence in metaphysical introspection and critique stands in for any real activity, in particular political activity. The postmodernist is cynical of the Grand Narratives of modernity, and instead revels in doubt, nihilism and apathy. The postmodernist, lacking a foundation for ethics, or a scientific basis for social analysis, has no other terms to assess anything on, other than subjective impressions and existing cultural values. Hence so much post-modern theory is taken up by the relatively apolitical study of "aesthetics." Applying his three tools of decadence, relativism and irony, the postmodern aesthete becomes either decadent, reactionary or nihilistic.

Following through on his claim that postmodernity is a historical blip, Bewes attacks the foundations upon which the epistemological break with modernity occurred: Auschwitz and the implication of modernist rationalism in the rise of totalitarianism.

"To equate such logic [national socialism] with *reason*, as Gillian Rose or indeed Hegel or Kant, or Arendt variously conceive it, is a postmodern fallacy."

From Bewes' perspective postmodern thought has turned against reason because it has mis-conceived rationality. Bewes goes on to characterise postmodernity as a fear of reason. Quoting Zygmunt Bauman and his cautionary relativism, as an example of the fear of risk inherent in postmodernity; Bewes shows how this fear of exercising reason can lead to a liberalist political philosophy which elevates the tolerance of confusion, to its prime principle. Bauman, like most postmodern relativists, justifies his position by a severe mistrust of the connection between reason and totalitarianism.

"This condition of uncertainty, of over-riding caution in the face of impasse or irresolution, is to all intents what Bauman prescribes for the postmodern ethical subject: embrace your bafflement, and live accordingly."

In the face of ethical choice, claims Bauman, it is better to err on the side of caution. Against this Bewes defines modernist reason as "risk", and Bauman's ethical caution as "fear of risk." The fear of violence which Hegel characterised as the lack of courage in facing the challenge of enlightened knowledge.

What is at stake is an important point, and this is the heart of the debate from which Bewes himself, somewhat disappointingly, retracts. The question is: is modernist rationalism as profoundly implicated in totalitarianism as many post-modernists would claim, or has rationalism been mis-conceived by postmodernism? In short, is it possible, in any way, to return to the modernist project of enlightened reason?

To address this question Bewes looks at a number of positions expounded by postmodern theorists on the subject of Auschwitz and Nazi general Eichmann's use of Kant's categorical imperative, as part of his defense at the Nürnberg trials. However, the weight of evidence he brings up against his own claim, far outweighs his own side of the argument, however boldly he states his case. "Auschwitz is a corollary not of reason, but of the fear of reason."

Disappointingly Bewes does not follow through the logic of his own argument to make a case for re-instating the modernist project; or to denounce postmodernism, as Habermas and Eagleton and Norris have done from their different positions. When faced with the immensity of the project before him he simply falls back on a rhetoric of exclamation: "[Postmodernity is] a dangerous rhetorical sophistry, a pervasive counter Enlightenment and relativistic drive to abandon ideas of truth, and the possibility of social progress." While he acknowledges the work done by anti-postmodern theorists he does not endorse their un-shaking belief in the reinstatement of the enlightenment project, or acknowledge the difficult work that is still to be done on supporting and developing such an argument. Nor does Bewes pay respect to their work or develop any of their arguments.

Bewes does not follow through in support of the initial quotation by Hegel upon which such an argument could be based. Instead Bewes heads off into the realms of contemporary politics, cultural criticism and literature in the attempt to find some real substance to grapple with. Believing as he does in some vague notion of "political engagement" and "risk" in the face of so much postmodern apathy. As he leaves the work of other theorists behind however, he also steps off the track that might have led him to a position which could legitimate the claims he makes.

Bewes about-turns on the importance of answering the question (the complicity of rationalism with totalitarianism) dismissing it as mere metaphysics. In a chapter *Energy vs. Depth: The Lure of Banality*, he develops the claim that we cannot apply metaphysics to politics; as the former is based upon notions of depth and the latter upon energy: the former on universal concepts and the latter upon cultural variables, contingent historic facts and localised pragmatics.

"Postmodern politics is therefore founded on a fundamental confusion between the affairs of politics and those of metaphysics. Its aims are all too apparent: to put a hold on the hazardous exercise of political rationality in the quest for metaphysical stability. This end necessitates that the political temperament, which is essentially one of instability, risk and perpetual uprooting, be divested of its credibility."

It is at this point that *Postmodernity and Cynicism* loses its credibility as a critique of postmodernity. In his exoneration of energy, temperament and force, Bewes starts to sound like his critique of rationality is coming from the perspective of an irrationalist: Nietzsche, and the proto-Neitzscheans, Deleuze and Foucault, as we all know, use the same language, and are well known postmodernists.

In attempting to find a basis for political action, through "passion, energy and force," Bewes steps out of philosophy, historical analysis and even politics, into the realm of the irrational, into the realm of fiction. It is not surprising then that he abandons the difficult work of theorists and philosophers to address the person of a fictional character (as a metaphor for the point he is trying to make): in the charismatic character of Rameau, in *La Neveu de Rameau*, by Diderot: a character whose existence is "to all appearances , the preference for energetic thoughtlessness, over the philosophers profundity... Rameau's position is one of resolute indifference to all 'higher things'...freedom, truth, genius, wisdom, posterity, truth or dignity." He is characterised as: "'The destructive character' an agent of unsanctioned lawmaking violence...the catalyst of history..."

Bewes pits the energy of Rameau against the impotent depth of the postmodern theorist (whom he characterises as "the metaphysical philosopher"), Rameau

is seen by Bewes as "the enemy of ...the pervasive fear of violence in 'late' postmodernity." Bewes quotes Hegel's references to Diderot's Rameau as an example of the negative movement of dialectic thought. Rameau is then built up through the rest of the book, as a metaphoric example of the energetic power of Hegel's dialectic between philosophy and action.

Bewes attempts to build up an emotive argument for some kind of political action, and spirit of risk, not by analysing the reason for "postmodern apathy", but by stockpiling examples, and attempting to create a sense of frustration with it. *Cynicism and Postmodernity* is filled with impatience and frustration but never gets beyond the limits that are causing the frustration. Inevitably, what Bewes is looking for is not a realpolitick or politics based upon methodological analysis, but instead a spirit of political engagement, a temperament even. A new kind of energy with which to sweep away cynicism. A passionate "risk".

Until he has answered the much bigger question, this notion of "risk" within the political arena seems unformed, and un-informed: a call to arms without a cause to fight for, energy without direction. Bewes, it seems, is almost willing to risk another Auschwitz in the name of the creative violence of reason.

The book should be heralded for its detailed diagnosis of the intellectual impasse of postmodernity, through all aspects of contemporary culture, quoting as it does, from a breath-taking array of sources in literature, theory, sociology, media studies and contemporary politics. The pluralistic and eclectic nature of Bewes' references, however, serve to confuse and defer the difficult argument that was initially intended. Thus Bewes' mixing of references to the K Foundation, Tony Blair, Derrida, Rorty, Death Brand Cigarettes, Auschwitz and Dazed and Confused magazine, serves only to dilute his argument.

It is exactly this attempt to pull together so many reference points and to jump between genres and disciplines in a flurry of intellectual activity, which nonetheless obscures the very clear issue at its core. Having diagnosed the problems of postmodernity, Bewes is unable to find a direction or methodology which might lead to a solution. His method is itself, irrational and eclectic. The subject areas he attempts to span are too broad, and we have no grounds in either metaphysics, empirical fact or political theory upon which to judge any of his statements. The form of the book itself, is a product of postmodern pluralism in academia, the breaking down of boundaries between disciplines. The book partakes of the same retreat from method and discipline into subjectivity, that it attempts to condemn. Bewes is interested in the notion of re-instating reason without actually exercising reason in the form of a rationally structured argument.

Ironically, the postmodern culture of cynical self-awareness and apathy is only added to by this book. As a culture, our cynicism exists not because we are unaware of what is wrong with postmodernism, but because we are only too aware of our inability to get out of the impasse, our inability to take a risk, to commit to a cause. *Cynicism and Postmodernity* is then another attempted critique of our cynical postmodern culture which inevitably adds to the canon of self-consciousness but impotent knowledge. All diagnosis and no cure. Knowing that we are cynical, just makes our cynicism all the more profound.

Ewan Morrison

live review

Homage to JG Ballard

Diana

Cours Albert, Paris: Sunday August 31 1997

THE CONCEPTUAL ARTIST Diana, "Our Lady of the Media," at last unveiled her latest music action piece to a public positively salivating with eagerness and anticipation. Earlier works by this former pupil of Wolf Vostell and one time member of Negativland had been criticised as being guache, self-indulgent and politically inept. Under the canopy of a starlit Parisian night, *Homage to JG Ballard* for four voices, Mercedes Benz and motorcycle cavalcade once and for all silenced even her sternest critics—that fawning rat-pack whose presence she so often bemoaned.

It was a stroke of marketing genius, if not of aesthetics, to employ some of this parasitic entourage to serve as the chorus in her most mature and considered piece of urban theatre. Detractors will carp that she had merely noted the grilling received by Guardian critics when they directed plays at a recent BAC season, and cynically sought to turn the media on itself, but those of us who count ourselves her fans see a more profound and original mind at work.

A small but select band of Diana's most ardent followers gathered at midnight to witness this crucial benchmark of late '90s art. The piece would be in three parts, the press release told us, starting at the fabulous Ritz Hotel, lit by one thousand chandeliers and emblematic of all that is tasteful about contemporary life, and ending at the rather more gloomy but undoubtedly hip underpass of the Cours Albert. Specuation was rife as to the myriad influences that this penetratingly perceptive, even cheeky, mistress of postmodernism would absorb, reconfigure and claim as her own. Some saw hints of Hans-Peter Kuhn; others argued that Diana was "the original Spice Girl". Others still protested that she was first and foremost the high priestess of post-kitsch, while a few cynics sneered that she just provided "Virilio for lounge lizards."

When you look into the void for too long, said Nietzche, the void starts looking into you. Diana was saying much the same in this elegant and powerfully visceral meditation on the trappings of power, fame and her own role as a creature of the media. The performance began with the quartet entering their vehicle, moving off at a steady pace, joined—with a clear nod to Fellini—by the drove of paparazzi. So far, so much traditional modern opera, the socialist realism of the outside environment alone hinting at anything radically new, but still within spitting distance of Jonathan Miller or Robert Le Page. Gradually, subtly, the pace shifted and the audience settled into watching, enraptured and absorbed, a kind of flight and pursuit as first one figure, then another, drew towards the artist, then withdrew, in a teasing foreplay that for some spectators was more than a little risque. The simple elegance of this opening movement, delicately bathed in the soft light from half a dozen car headlamps, did not, however, offer more than a hint of what was to come.

The second and penultimate movement was surely the culmination of a life's work by this gifted young artist (who has been compared favourably to Tracy Emin and even humorously dubbed "Scanner in drag"), at once calling to mind the Lettrist notions of derive, contemporary chaos theory, and wickedly—in the kind of whimsical gesture that has made her the "Queen of the people's hearts"—the famous Papa/Nicole car advertisements (allegedly scripted by one of Diana's mentors, Raoul Vaneigem). The almost balletic grace which the Mercedes Benz (deployed in reference, no doubt, to Diana's favourite Japanese noisecore group Merzbow's notorious edition-of-one CD, sealed into a car of the very same model) leapt and bounded across the Cours Albert literally took the breath of this critic away. The sense of abnegation on the part of the players, akin to the vertiginous feeling of oblivion encountered in the work of the most extreme of today's isolationists, was (it was generally agreed) singularly impressive. A chorus of delighted mews of appreciation rose from the spellbound audience. Who could fault Diana's biting critique of bourgeois mores, her mercurial speed-reading of the contemporary urban landscape, her quicksilver deliniation of neo-classical hubris in the figures represented (the artist herself daringly foregrounded) in this most alluring and, it must be said, sexy masterpiece?

It was only with the so-called Epilogue that Diana could be accused of letting her fanbase down. Nowadays who among us has not grown bored of the endless screenings of so many interchangeable hospital dramas, the tedious Casualtys and ERs, chocabloc with cliches—the alcoholic surgeon, the wounded eccentric, the inevitable hackneyed recourse to (one one thousand, two one thousand) cardiac machines? Diana's attempt at a supra-ironic positioning of the artist (a la Orlan) at the centre of the operating space came across merely as inapposite and pandering to the demands of hoi polloi. The smorgasbord of mangled metal, the heady cocktail of petrol and bodily fluids, the positively electrifying incorporation of police and ambulance sirens—son et lumiere sans pareil, indeed!—was already more than enough, and this over-long and frankly dull conclusion to the music, until then so full of futurist sound and fury, was a major miscalculation. Nevertheless, the critical response was overwhelmingly positive, and both public and professional scribes agreed that this would be right at the top of their Hits of '97 lists. So much for the "Silly Season."

Although a repeat performance seems out of the question—Diana insists on the aesthetic priority of public art performed in real time and is barely interested in documentation, dissing it as at best a halfway house—the rave reviews that this new work has already attracted seem destined to keep it in the public mind for some considerable time to come.

Ed Baxter