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 postmodernity.

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 andtotalising ideologies. Postmodernism is seen by Bewes as a cynical reaction to the aims of enlightenment thought and modernity. For Bewes, as for postmodernism’s time served critics, Habermas and Norris and Eagleton; the postmodern is a temporal historic blop, 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 pyrrhical violence, and epistemological kinesis...”

According to Bewes, postmodernity is pre-staged for Hegel, to be dismissed in The Phenomenology, in which Hegel describes the possible responses to the vileness of consciousness during its progression towards knowledge. Paraphrasing Hegel, Bewes diagnoses three distinct types of response to the fear of knowledge. These are characterised as “decadence, relativism and nihilism.”

According to Bewes: “Hegel introduces and dismisses the intellectual credibility of these recognizably postmodern states of mind, symptoms of a crisis in the thoroughly instigating skepticism of the healthy philosophico 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 “aesthetic.” Applying his three tools of decadence, relativism and irony, the postmodern aesthetic becomes either decadent, reactionary or nihilistic.

Following through on his claim that postmodernism is a historical blop, 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 reason inherent in postmodernism: Bewes shows how this fear of exercising reason can lead to a liberalist political philosophy which elevates the tolerance of politics; as the former is based upon notions of depth and the latter upon energy, the former universal concept 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 temperamental is essentially one of instability, risk and perpetual uprooting, he divested of its credibility.”

It is at this point that Postmodernity and Cynicism loses its credibility as a critique of postmodernity. In his exhoration 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 characterises the dif- ficult 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 charismatically 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 profoundness...”

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 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 dialectical 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 realpolitik 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 unfounded, and un-informed: to call at 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, Hegel’s references to Diderot’s Rameau as an example of violence in ‘late’ postmodernity. Bewes quotes this penetratingly perceptive, even cheeky, mistress of neo-classical hubris in the figures represented 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 mewers of appreciation rose from the spellbound audience. Could foul Diana’s biting critique of bourgeois mores, her mercurial speed-reading of the contemporary urban landscape, her quicksilver delima of neo-classical baboons in the figures represented of 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 fans down. Nowadays who among us has not grown bored of the endless screenings of so many interchangeable hospital dramas, the tedious Casualties and ERs, chocoholice 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-organic positioning of the artist (a la Orlan) at the very epicentre of the opening space came across merely as inappropriate and pandering to the demands of loili poili. The smogmarged of mangled metal, the heady cocktail of petrol and bodily fluids, the positively electrifying incorporation of police and ambulance sirens—on et lumiere sans pareil, indeed!—was already more than enough, and this over-long and frankly dull conclusion to the music, and the hard 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 mewers of appreciation rose from the spellbound audience. Could foul Diana’s biting critique of bourgeois mores, her mercurial speed-reading of the contemporary urban landscape, her quicksilver delima of neo-classical baboons in the figures represented of the artist herself daringly foregrounded in this most alluring and, it must be said, sexy masterpiece?

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